

THE CONGREGATION IN ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE SYNOD

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[WELS Michigan District Convention, June 12-14, 1984, Saginaw, Michigan]

Misunderstanding of the scriptural doctrines of the Church and ministry has been common in the history of Christianity. The development of the papacy was in part the result of a misunderstanding of these important teachings. The Roman concept of apostolic succession, the indelible character of her clergy, the hierarchical structure of her organization, the belief that the Holy Christian Church is a visible entity are all errors in the doctrine of Church and ministry which developed and became entrenched during the Middle Ages. One of the blessings of the Reformation was Luther's rediscovery of the scriptural truth that the Church is essentially invisible because it is the congregation of all believers and that all believers are kings and priests before God (the universal priesthood of believers).

When Luther implemented that doctrine in the lands of the Reformation, he urged the princes and rulers of those Lutheran lands to take the leadership of the territorial churches because they were the best informed and most capable laymen in those churches.¹ But a misunderstanding of Church and ministry eventually resulted from Luther's well-intentioned use of princes and rulers as heads of the territorial churches. The European state church, established by the later principle of "cuius regio, eius religio," began to blur the biblical teachings of Church and ministry. The European state church concept eventually resulted in the rather awkward situation that a Roman Catholic king became supreme bishop of the Lutheran Church in Saxony in 1830.² The enforced merger of the Reformed and Lutheran churches in the Prussian Union was an inevitable result of the state church concept.

Even among the orthodox Lutherans who immigrated to this country there was not a clear grasp of the scriptural teachings on Church and ministry. The absolute authority granted to Martin Stephan in the Saxon immigration to Perry County, Missouri, was actually a return to Rome's doctrine of church and ministry. Only after Stephan was removed from office because of his fall into gross sin did the founding fathers of the Missouri Synod come to a clear understanding of these important truths. After months of studying the Scriptures, the writings of Luther and, the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians, C.F.W. Walther presented his famous Altenburg Theses on Church and ministry. The later conflict with Grabau and his Buffalo Synod and their romanizing tendencies prompted Walther to write even more extensively.

But some of those who followed Walther in the Missouri Synod misunderstood their former teacher³ and began to teach that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the Church and that the pastorate is the only divinely instituted form of the public ministry.⁴ A synod, they claimed, was merely a human arrangement while the local congregation was a divine institution. They said that all offices in the Church were derived from the parish pastorate. Many believe that these errors on Church and ministry contributed to the terrible doctrinal problems which developed later in the Missouri Synod.

¹ Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Ministry." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Spring 1982, p. 101.

² Carl S. Mundinger, *Church Government in the Missouri Synod*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), p. 16.

³ Lawrenz, *op. cit.*, p. 113. For full treatment read the entire essay.

⁴ August Pieper, "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and its Discipline." *WLQ*, April 1962, p. 81-85.

But even in our own Synod there was much confusion on what the Bible actually taught.⁵ In the early decades of this century our Seminary faculty, particularly Prof. August Pieper through a series of doctrinal essays, helped guide our Synod to a correct understanding of these important truths.

But we dare not take for granted the heritage our forefathers have left us. Each generation needs to make the truths of Scripture its own. As our Synod by God's grace continues to expand and grow, it is particularly important that we have a correct understanding of the biblical teachings of Church and ministry. It will be our task in this essay to review these precious doctrines and apply them to our theme: THE CONGREGATION IN ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE SYNOD.

⁵Paul Kuske, "A Survey of the Development of the Doctrine of the Church and Ministry in the WELS, ELS, CLC and LCMS." An essay presented to the April 1981 pastoral conference of the Northern Conference of the Michigan District.

I

The church is the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Ghost has brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior. Since only believers are in the church, the church is of necessity invisible.

The basic meaning of the Greek word ἐκκλησία which we generally translate “church” is those who have been called out. More precisely it means an assembly, gathering or congregation.⁶ The word ἐκκλησία is used some 115 times in the New Testament and usually refers to the Church of Christ in one way or another.⁷ Even a quick glance at a few of these passages will demonstrate that ἐκκλησία refers to those whom the Holy Ghost has brought to faith in Jesus.

In Matthew 16 we read that Jesus asked His disciples who people were saying He was. Some believed He was John the Baptist. Others said Elijah, Jeremiah or another prophet. Then Jesus asked the disciples for their own opinion of Him. Peter, answering for all, declared, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*” Jesus replied, “*Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church (ἐκκλησία) and the gates of hell will not overcome it.*” (Matthew 16:13-18) Jesus said that He would build His Church on the message that He was the Christ, the Son of God, the Savior whom God had promised to send already in the Garden of Eden. For the Christ was the Savior promised in the Old Testament.

Those who believe that truth are members of Christ’s body, building blocks in the Holy Christian Church. As St. Paul reveals, *And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. . . . But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. . . . He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.* (Eph 1:22-23, 2:13, 17-22)

Again the Holy Ghost through the pen of His apostle explained what He meant by church when He caused Paul to write, *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with those who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.* (I Cor 1:2)

Since the Church is all who have been sanctified, that is, brought to faith in Jesus, the Church is of necessity invisible. Since we cannot look into anyone’s heart to see if he is really a believer or not, We cannot tell who really is a member of the Church and who is not. As our WELS Theses on Church and Ministry state, “We can judge others only on the basis of the profession of faith that they make in word and deed. Such a profession can be false and hypocritical.”⁸ The Lord alone can look into our hearts. Therefore He alone can discern those who are truly members of his Church. For *the Lord knows those who are his.* (II Tim 2:19)

By synecdoche we also call gatherings of those who publicly confess the same doctrine ‘church’ even though in such gatherings hypocrites will also be mingled. This is the use of the word church in its so-called improper sense. But even when we use the word church in this way we are not saying that hypocrites are part of

⁶ Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 240.

Kittel, Bromily, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament.* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), vol. III, p. 501ff.

⁷ Heinrich Vogel, “The Doctrine of the Church and Ministry.” WLQ, January 1976, p. 9.

⁸ “Theses on the Church and Ministry.” WLQ, April 1970, p. 125.

the Church, but are merely mingled with it. As Prof. August Pieper writes, “The synecdoche employed here is therefore not really an inclusion, but rather an exclusion which ignores the foreign elements.”⁹

The Church is the communion of saints, the invisible union of all believers. That seems obvious to those of us who have been raised in that truth. Yet that truth is essential to our understanding of everything else the Bible teaches about the Church. As our Wisconsin Synod Theses point out:

As long as we keep the truth that the Church is the communion of saints in mind, everything that Scripture tells us about the Church will fall into its proper place and can be readily understood. At the same time all the false notions which men have entertained and still entertain concerning the Church are readily exposed.¹⁰

⁹ August Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

¹⁰ “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” *op. cit.*, p. 124. Confer also August Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 88ff.

II

The Church, though invisible, is present wherever the Gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered (the marks of the Church). The Church is established, strengthened and extended only through the means of grace.

Jesus told His disciples that it was on the rock of Peter's confession that He would build His Church. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." . . . "on this rock I will build my, church." (Matt 16:16,18) Peter's confession was nothing else than a proclamation of the Gospel. St. Paul tells us that the Church *is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.* (Eph 2:20) That means that the only way the church can be built is on the message of the inspired writers which centers in Christ.

Paul speaks of the relationship between the Gospel and the Church when he writes, *Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they be sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" . . . Consequently faith comes from hearing the message and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* (Rom 10:13-15,17) The Church is extended only through the preaching of the Gospel.

When Jesus sent His disciples out to establish and extend His Church, He gave them only His Word and Sacraments to accomplish their task. He told them, *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* (Matt 28:19-20)

The Lord of the Church has promised that wherever His Word is proclaimed it will produce the results He desires. Wherever the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments (the visible gospel) are administered, there His Church will be. For He has assured us, *As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.* (Is 55:10-11) God's Word and His Church go hand in hand; they cannot be separated. As Luther said, "God's Word cannot be without God's people; again God's people cannot be without God's Word."¹¹ Wherever we see the marks of the Church, God's Word and Sacraments, there we know the Church will be. The marks of the Church do not make the invisible Church visible, but rather indicate its presence.

The Church is established, extended and strengthened only through the Gospel. The only task the Lord has assigned to His Church is to make disciples of all nations by means of that Gospel and to instruct them in His truth. Therefore every congregation, synod or other church organization will restrict themselves to that task and those means. Every group within a congregation or department within a Synod must somehow be related to that task and those means or it really has no place in the Church. Jesus did not establish His Church to become a political force or to reform society through the establishment of laws. The purpose of the Church is not to provide the opportunity for mere socializing and recreation. We also need to be careful lest a proliferation of organizations within a congregation or synod begins to interfere with the tasks given to the Church of reaching out to lost souls with the Gospel and nourishing and caring for the souls of Christ's sheep with His Word and Sacraments.

¹¹ Quoted by C. Lawrenz, op. cit., p. 113-114, and August Pieper, op. cit., p. 113-114.

III

It is God's will that Christians gather around the means of grace to perform the tasks assigned to the Church, but He has not prescribed the specific forms of those gatherings. Every gathering of Christians around the means of grace to carry out the work of the Church is Church.

In the post-Walther era of the Missouri Synod Franz Pieper and others began to teach that the local congregation is a divinely instituted organization, but that a synod was only a human arrangement.¹² They did not deny that a synod was church, but said that it was church in some other sense than the local congregation¹³ because the former was a human arrangement and the latter existed by divine institution. Later Theodore Graebner went so far as to say that synods or other larger unions and organizations were not church in any sense of the word.¹⁴ This false doctrine not only led to a misunderstanding of the scriptural principles of church fellowship, but also to great difficulty in carrying out doctrinal discipline on a synodical level.

Examining the Scriptures, however, we find no words of institution for any specific form of the Church. We do see that groups of Christians in apostolic times did gather around the means of grace in a variety of ways. The Book of Acts speaks of these various groups. Paul and others addressed letter to them. But we find no specific directives as to how they were to gather nor any words of institution for any such organization.

Yet it was God's will for them to gather. The Holy Ghost moved them to gather. As Prof. J.P. Meyer observes:

We find no instructions to the believers to organize local congregations. No such instructions were needed. When the Holy Ghost brought a man to faith, He did not create him as an individual Christian to live his faith in isolation; He created him as a member of Christ's spiritual body, as a member of the Church. There were not two steps: The believer did not first become a Christian and then join the Church. He was born into the Church; just as a child by his natural birth comes into the world not merely as an individual, but at once as a member of a certain family. Thus wherever two or more Christians found themselves living in the same place, they, realizing their spiritual fellowship, spontaneously (not to say automatically) began to exercise it. No special command was needed.—Yet this we do find. The New Testament speaks of one case where some members for certain reasons failed to attend the service meetings of their groups. It was the church to which the Epistle to the Hebrews is addressed. The Epistle warns them: "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is" (chap. 10:25).¹⁵

Prof. August Pieper warns about making scriptural examples into universally binding principles without divine command to do so.

Moreover, what the Apostles by the Holy Spirit or in good Christian common sense ordained or instituted locally or temporarily or for the obtaining circumstances must not be made into a universally valid law, unless, indeed, it be founded on the essence of the Church itself or on the law of love; otherwise we shall have to question to many congregations in our time the divinely intended form (I am referring here to passages such as Acts 6; 1 Tim. 3:8ff, 5:9ff; I Cor 12 and 14; Eph 4:11). The words in I Corinthians 3:21ff.: "all things are yours," and in Galatians 3, 4,

¹² Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), vol III, p. 420-422.

¹³ August Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁴ Kurt Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*. (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Press, 1977), p. 54-55.

¹⁵ J.P. Meyer, "Synod and Congregation." WLQ, October 1964, p. 256-257.

and 5 concerning the freedom of Christians in the New Testament are more general, greater, and more significant than all external individual institutions and must govern these.¹⁶

There is no New Testament ceremonial law. In Christian freedom believers can gather around the means of grace to carry out the Lord's work in whatever way best fits their circumstances. We dare not insist on the forms used in the New Testament as divinely instituted unless the Scriptures give us specific commands. We must also be careful not to read our present day organizational structures into the pages of the New Testament. For honest exegesis will reveal that the early Christians organized in ways quite foreign to our modern situation.

Though the Scriptures do not prescribe how Christians are to gather, they reveal that it is God's will that we do gather. As we heard previously the writer to the Hebrews warns about failing to do so: *Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, - "But let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* (Heb 10:25) Christians need to gather for mutual edification, to grow in the knowledge of the truth, for mutual admonition and encouragement. The Holy Ghost tells us that: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.* (Col 3:16) And again, *Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself or you also may be tempted. Carry each others burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ.* (Gal 6:1-2)

Christians join with each other to hear God's Word, receive the sacraments and to carry out the great commission. For although the great commission was given to every individual Christian, they can carry out that commission more efficiently and extensively when they band together.

Wherever Christians are gathered in response to the Gospel or on behalf of it, there Christ is present with His blessings and power. Wherever Christians are gathered around the Gospel or on behalf of it, there the Church is present. For our Savior assures us, *For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.* (Matt 18:20)

Christians will be drawn together to carry out the Lord's directives in various ways according to circumstances. Yet we realize that "the basic and simplest form of such gatherings has always been and still is the local congregation."¹⁷ It is generally organized according to geographical boundary lines. However, "the local congregation must not be confused with the legal corporation."¹⁸ We call such a local congregation "Church" not because of its outward form, but because the marks of the Church indicate that it is present there. The outward form and organization will vary with time and circumstances. The form and organization of congregations in the first and second centuries A.D. were quite different from what is customary among us today. Yet the essence of the Church remains the same. The purpose of the Church has not changed.

Christian throughout the ages have also formed larger organizations to carry out the great commission or to meet common problems. Already in apostolic times Christians met at Jerusalem in a council (synod) to settle a dispute which had arisen (Acts 15). Representatives from Jerusalem and Antioch met and reached a decision which affected the Church at large. Again, we are told that the congregations of Greece and Macedonia joined in gathering an offering for the congregation in Jerusalem and sent that offering through chosen representatives. (II Cor 8-9) In neither case was there a specific divine command for these groups of Christians to join together in the manner they did, yet in both cases they were certainly led by the Holy Spirit to carry out these God-pleasing activities. They joined in a common effort because in this way they were able to accomplish their task better than they could by themselves.

So also today our congregations have formed a larger organization to do jointly that which would be difficult to do alone. Most congregations would find it a formidable challenge to train pastors and teachers by

¹⁶ August Pieper, op. cit., p. 87.

¹⁷ Vogel, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁸ J.P. Meyer, Senior Dogmatics Notes. (Mequon: Seminary Mimeo Company, 1971), p. 157.

themselves. Most congregations would experience difficulty in training and sending missionaries to other parts of our country or around the world. A congregation standing by itself will have more trouble coping with the winds of false doctrine and the attacks of Satan than if it stands together with congregations of like-minded Christians. We need mutual edification, admonition and encouragement also on the congregational level. By forming a synod congregations are able to train pastors and teachers, send out missionaries and participate in mutual edification and admonition. Congregations of believers certainly do not cease being Church when they gather in such a larger organization to carry out the work of the Church.

Our Synod is also Church because it has the marks of the Church. It is a gathering of Christians around the means of grace to carry out the great commission. The outward form or organization is different from the local congregation, but the essence of the Church remains. The only difference is in the scope of the work each carries out. "The local congregation, smaller in extent is more comprehensive in the scope of its work than a synod."¹⁹ Synods are formed to assist congregations in those activities they would find difficult to do by themselves. That is also reflected in the Constitution of our Wisconsin Synod:

Article IV - Object

The object and purpose of the Synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church:

- (a) By assisting and counseling in every appropriate way the pastors, teachers, and congregations affiliated with the Synod;
- (b) By establishing and maintaining theological seminaries, colleges, academies, schools, and other institutions of learning;
- (c) By establishing and maintaining home and world missions and such charitable institutions as it may deem appropriate to its calling;
- (d) By printing, publishing, purchasing, selling and disseminating literature which maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice;
- (e) By furnishing appropriate literature for parish schools, Sunday schools, missions, institutions, and churches.²⁰

Our Synod has been the source of many God-given blessings for the congregations, pastors and teachers which make up its membership. By God's grace we have been able to establish an educational system so extensive that many of our pastors have been able to receive their entire training from kindergarten through their final year at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from our Synod's teachers and professors. We have an educational system that many other church bodies not only admire, but covet. Through our home mission program we have been able to establish an extensive network of congregations throughout the United States and Canada. Because of this, when our members move to different areas of our country we are usually able to direct them to one of our WELS congregations in which they will hear God's Word proclaimed as they have learned to know it. Our system of generous subsidy for newly-founded mission congregations has enabled scattered groups of our Wisconsin Synod families to grow into self-supporting congregations dedicated to the proclamation of the Gospel. Through our world mission program we are able to carry the Gospel to the far corners of the world.

Conventions, conferences, institutes and seminars offer the opportunity for mutual edification, admonition and spiritual growth. When a congregation experiences a vacancy, District Presidents are able to provide lists of qualified candidates or assign graduates to the vacant office. One of the compelling problems our Synod first faced was ensuring an adequate supply of pastors and teachers for our congregations. Our

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁰ The Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod. Corrected to August 13, 1975. (Milwaukee: WELS Offices), p. 3-4. Confer also the stated objectives of WELS as quoted by Schuetze and Habeck, The Shepherd under Christ. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1974), p. 355.

Synodical association also allows us to publish sound Christian reading and instructional material. Through our Synod we are able to express fellowship with Christians around the world who teach and believe as we do and to offer them help and encouragement.

But Synodical membership also involves obligations for pastors, teachers and congregations. Pastors and teachers will recognize their obligation to attend, participate in and accept assignments for conventions and conferences. They will display a willingness to serve the church at large on boards, committees and in whatever other capacity they are asked to serve. Congregations will be willing to allow their called workers to serve the Synod in various capacities.

No congregation in the Synod is an island to itself. Each will recognize the validity of the excommunication and congregational discipline of the others unless it can be shown that that discipline was contrary to Scripture. In that case Christian love demands that the erring congregation be corrected. It goes without saying that a congregation will not deviate from Scriptural truth as it is taught and practiced in our Synod. If doctrinal error does occur, we have the obligation to attempt to restore the erring congregation, pastor, teacher, professor or Synodical official in brotherly love. Even in matters of adiaphora congregations will be careful not to do anything that might disturb or cause problems for the other members of the Synodical family. Christian love demands it.

Since congregation and Synod are both Church, they exist for the same purpose--the proclamation of the Gospel. They are not, however, in competition with each other, but complement each other. They are not in competition with each other, but have different spheres of activity. Congregations form synods to carry out those activities which they find difficult to carry out themselves. The Synod exists to assist its constituency. Congregations will therefore be eager to keep informed about the work the Synod is doing in their name. They will be anxious to take part in the decision making process by sending delegates to conventions and pastor/delegate conferences. They can exercise their right to memorialize the Synod in convention. In areas not decided by the Word of God, they will realize that a majority vote will prevail. The minority will be willing to go along with the majority for the sake of love and good order. At the same time the majority in Christian love will never ignore the wishes or disregard the concerns of the minority. Our Seminary's pastoral theology text also reminds us:

It is self-evident that a congregation should not, however, blindly follow decisions that involve matters of conscience and confession of truth. The congregation which believes that its synod has erred from Scripture has the responsibility of brotherly admonition toward its brothers in the synod.²¹

The congregation will recognize the importance of the work of the Synod and will give prayerful consideration and attention to the financial support of that work. A congregation would never use money for local projects which has been offered by its members for Synodical purposes. At the same time, the Church at large will recognize the importance of the local congregation and its work and will realize that the Synod exists only to assist the local congregation in its work. Though the Synod is more than merely an advisory body, its authority is limited to its sphere of activity. It has no authority in the purely local activities of the congregation.

Our Wisconsin Synod Theses on the Church and Ministry describe the relationship between congregation and Synod in this way. Permit me to quote at length.

*In essence the various groupings in Jesus' name for the proclamation of His Gospel all lie on the same plane. They are all church in one and the same sense, namely in this sense that on the basis of the marks of the Church the Lord lets us apprehend the presence of the *una sancta* (the Holy Christian Church) in each such grouping of people, and thus enables us to acknowledge them as gatherings of believers possessing the ministry of the keys with the right of exercising this*

²¹ Schuetze and Habeck, op. cit., p. 361.

ministry in accordance with love and order. Here we need to distinguish between the possession of a right and the God-pleasing exercise of that right.

As the Holy Spirit leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name (Jesus' name is His Gospel revelation) He *always* constrains them to do so in an orderly manner (I Cor. 14:33, 40) and in the spirit of love (I Cor. 16:14). The Holy Spirit never leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name for competitive purposes so as to duplicate, hinder, or disturb that scope of the ministry of the keys which is already effectively provided for by a previously established grouping of Christians. Every added grouping of Christians in Jesus' name, as effected by the Holy Spirit, will be for the purpose of assisting the primary groupings in exercising certain phases of the ministry of the keys more fully and more efficiently in keeping with the great commission of the Lord (e.g. in mission work, in Christian education, in the training of public servants of the Word, in Christian charity, in the supervision of doctrine and practice) or for the purpose of providing needed strengthening through Word and Sacrament which, because of special circumstances, is not adequately offered or cannot well be offered through already existing groupings (e.g. worship services at conferences and synodical conventions, ministry to students, to the handicapped, to the institutionalized, etc.).

The more fully also the secondary groupings of Christians remain conscious of their essential character as Church, the more keenly they will feel their *responsibility of functioning in accordance with love and good order* and thus carefully restrict themselves to those phases of the ministry of the keys which would otherwise fail to receive the attention that they deserve.²² (Emphasis theirs)

²² "Theses on the Church and Ministry." op. cit., p. 127-128.

IV

The ministry of the keys was given by our Lord to each individual Christian. Wherever Christians are gathered they have the right to call individuals to exercise the keys publicly in their name. Our Lord has ordained this public ministry, but He has not prescribed any specific form for it.

When Jesus asked His disciples who they thought He was, Simon Peter, speaking for the group declared, *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* Jesus replied, *“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (Matt 16:16-19) On the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and the Christ, that is, the Savior God promised to send, the Church is built. Jesus has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven to those to whom the Father has revealed that truth as He had to Peter, or in other words, believers. God’s forgiveness opens the gates of heaven. Believers have the authority to announce that forgiveness to fellow sinners.

It is evident that that authority was not given to Peter alone because Jesus repeated those words to the disciples to whom He appeared after His resurrection. He said to them, *“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”* (John 20:21-23) Jesus gave all of His disciples the authority to use the keys. He gave them all the authority to announce His forgiveness to penitent sinners and to tell the impenitent that their sins are not forgiven because by their impenitence they have rejected God’s gracious offer. That authority was given not only to those disciples who were present in that room but to all Jesus’ disciples (every believer) of all time. For Jesus has commissioned His Church to take that message into all the world until the end of time. He has told us, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.* (Matthew 28:19-20)

Lest anyone fall into Rome’s error of believing that that authority is given only to properly ordained clergy, we need to bear what Peter wrote to the “elect” (believers) living throughout the region we know as modern day Turkey. He told them and he tells us, *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.* (I Pt 2:9) To declare God’s praises means to tell others what He has done, to proclaim His forgiveness and the salvation won by the substitutionary death of His Son our Savior. That message is the key which opens the door to heaven. That message therefore has been entrusted to every believer. This use of the keys, this ministry of the Gospel is the only office instituted by Christ for His Church and it is given to every believer.

Every believer and every gathering of believers have not only the right, but the duty to exercise the keys. As our Lord tells us, *If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established in the mouth of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.* (Matt 18:15-20)

When Missouri Synod theologians say that this passage is referring only to the local congregation,²³ they are begging the question and are guilty of reading their preconceived notions into the inspired text. The use

²³ Franz Pieper, op. cit., vol. III, p. 421.

of the keys was given to every Christian. Therefore wherever two or three Christians gather around the Gospel, they have the authority to use the keys. Wherever two or three believers gather in the name of Jesus to carry out the work of the Church, Jesus is also present with His blessings. Wherever two or three believers gather in Jesus' name, there the Church will be.

Every Christian and every gathering of Christians have the authority to use the keys. But since all Christians are equal before God without rank or distinction, no Christian has the right to assume on his own the office of the public ministry. Every Christian has the authority to use the keys, but for the sake of good order (I Cor 14:40) a group of Christians will call an individual or individuals to administer the keys in their name. Every Christian has the authority to use the keys, but Christians are not equally qualified to discharge the duties of the public ministry. A group of Christians will therefore call only those who by their gifts and training are qualified to perform the functions of the public ministry.

The public ministry therefore is the administration of the keys in the name of a group of Christians. Our WELS Theses on the Church and Ministry state:

This public ministry is not generically different from the common priesthood of all Christians. It constitutes a social God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel.²⁴

Since the use of the keys was given to every Christian and those in the public ministry are acting in the name of those who called them, all responsibility and authority in the public ministry flow from the calling body to the one called. In the hierarchy of Roman Catholicism authority comes from the top down. According to the Scriptures it comes from the bottom up—from Christ's people to the called worker.

The public ministry is God's gift to His people and should not be despised. It is His will that individuals be called to exercise the keys publicly. He has established qualifications for those who serve in that ministry (I Tim 3:1-12, Titus 1:5-10) and when a group of Christians call someone to serve them, it is God Himself who places him into his office. As Paul told the elders from Ephesus, *Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood.* (Acts 20:2B) To the Corinthians Paul wrote, *God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us.* (I Cor 5:19-20) As ambassadors of Christ those called into the public ministry have no other message to proclaim than Christ's message. Christ's ambassadors can do nothing else.

It is therefore God who has instituted the public ministry. But He has not prescribed any specific forms for that ministry. The contention of the Missouri Synod, LCR and others that the parish pastorate is the only God-ordained office in the Christian Church²⁵ is untenable. To equate the terms elder and overseer (bishop) with our modern parish pastorate²⁶ is to read our present day circumstances into the pages of the New Testament.

We find no words of institution for any specific form of the public ministry. Rather already in apostolic times the public ministry was exercised in a variety of ways. The Christians in Jerusalem chose seven deacons to supervise charitable work in their name. In his letter to the Ephesians St. Paul speaks of various aspects of the public ministry and calls those who serve in those capacities gifts of God. *It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare Christ's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.* (Eph 4:11-12) To the Corinthians he writes, *There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each man is given the manifestation for the common good.* (I Cor 12:4-7) Paul then speaks about the public use

²⁴ "Theses on the Church and ministry." op. cit., p. 129.

²⁵ Harold Wicke, "Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God-ordained Office in the Church?" WLQ, April 1971, p. 113.

²⁶ Franz Pieper, op. cit., vol. III, p. 443.

of the keys in Corinth. The form of that public ministry in Corinth was far different from what we are accustomed to today. We need to recognize that. For although the public ministry is a divine institution, the form it takes will vary according to circumstances.

When we gather as Christians in a local congregation we call pastors, teachers Sunday School teachers, elders, church council members, etc., to administer the keys publicly in our name. As we gather as Christians in a synod, we call professors, administrators, synodical and district presidents, 'etc.', to administer the keys in our name. As God in His grace causes a congregation or synod to grow, Christians will often find it necessary to call more workers, often to very specific tasks in a wide variety of offices.

The difference in these offices is not that some are in the public ministry and others are not. The difference is in the scope of their call, in the specific work they are asked to do in the name of the Christians who have called them. This difference in the scope of the call, however, does not imply a difference in rank among the various called workers. "The idea of rank is foreign to the church."²⁷ As our Savior tells us, *But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.* (Matt 23:8; cf also Lk 22:24-27) But each called worker will be careful not to interfere in the ministry of another called worker. In our system the primary form of the public ministry is usually the parish pastorate.²⁸ The call of the parish pastor is the most inclusive. The scope of his call is the broadest.

Ministry (*διακονία*) means service. A minister (*διάκονος*) is a servant. He serves the Lord who placed Him into office and he serves the group of Christians who called him. But the public ministry also involves leadership. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us, *Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.* (Heb 13:17) Those who serve in our name are worthy of honor, respect and monetary compensation. *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor (honorarium, compensation?), especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.* (I Tim 5:17) Called workers are to be honored because they are doing the Lord's work. They are to be obeyed because they are proclaiming what God has proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures. The only authority they have is the authority of God's Word. On the other hand, no called worker has the right to impose his will on God's people in matters of adiaphora.

We expect our called workers to be leaders. Those who have been entrusted with a particular aspect of the Synod's work will generally have the best understanding of that aspect of the Synod's work. We will respect their opinions in that particular area. When we call people into these offices we expect them to show leadership in directing the Synod's activities in those areas. However, since it is human nature that our own work, interests and ministry loom largest in our own eyes and our own pet projects seem most important to us, all of us—laymen, congregational leaders, pastors, teachers and those called to synodical office will recognize the importance of the other aspects of the Lord's work and the need for balance in that work. Laymen, congregational workers and synodical workers will remember that the fruits of faith of God's people will determine the amount of Kingdom work that can be done. We will recognize that only the means of grace, the Gospel in God's Word and the Sacraments, can increase those fruits of faith. It is that Gospel which called workers have been called to administer. All of us also need to remember that individual Christians and congregations will be in various stages of spiritual maturity and will differ in their relative strengths and weaknesses. We will therefore be very careful about trying to make statistical comparisons or applying averages to individuals or congregations.

Since our Synodical organization is acting in the name of every member of the Synod, our congregations, pastors and teachers will take an active interest in our Synod's work and will willingly lend their active support. Since those who are called into Synodical office are serving the constituency of they Synod, they will want to receive as much input from that constituency as possible before formulating, finalizing or implementing plans and programs. The members of Synod will understand the importance of allowing Synodical workers to do the job we have called them to do. Synodical workers will avoid the impression that

²⁷ Meyer, *Senior Dogmatics Notes*. op. cit., p. 166.

²⁸ Wicke, op. cit., p. 120.

any synodical program is being imposed from the top down on the members of Synod. Because of the scope of their call, parish pastors are in a unique position to promote the work of the Synod among the members of their congregations. They will take that responsibility seriously! Synodical workers will recognize that because of the scope of the parish pastor's call, he is in closest touch with God's people and has the best understanding of their spiritual condition and needs. They will never do anything to undermine him or bypass him in his role as shepherd of his flock.

Though we are God's children, we remain sinners in a sin-filled world. Because of this problems will arise in our relationships as Christians. But if we keep in mind what the Scriptures have to say about the Church and its ministry, the relationship between congregation and Synod will be fruitful and God-pleasing.

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