

C.F.W. Walther's 8th Thesis on Church and Ministry: Did Missouri Go Too Far?

Christopher D. White
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary
Senior Church History

November 1, 2004

C.F.W. Walther's 8th Thesis on Church and Ministry: Did Missouri Go Too Far?

In 1851, Lutheran theologian C.F.W. Walther, a founding father of Lutheranism in America and former president of the Missouri Synod, wrote ten theses on the Holy Ministry and the Pastoral Office. These theses, known as the Altenburg Theses, were formulated to combat false notions in Lutheranism about the Holy Ministry, especially as it applied to the Pastoral office. Some viewed the Pastor as the sole authority in administering and communicating the means of grace, because the pastor publicly carried out those responsibilities on behalf of the congregation. Others, on the other end of the spectrum, felt that the office of pastor presented a problem of hierarchical rule that would undermine the authority of the means of grace.

In his eighth thesis, a thesis which is often quoted and debated among scholars of both the Missouri and Wisconsin synods, Walther writes, "*The Pastoral ministry [Predigtamt] is the highest office in the church, and from it stem all other offices.*"¹ There remains today a number of questions concerning Walther's thesis. First, what did he mean when he spoke of all other offices "stemming" from the highest office? Second, did he mean to say that, since the Pastoral office is the highest office in the church and the only place where the ecclesiastical rites and privileges are exercised fully occur in the local congregation, that God has established one form of gospel ministry to be carried out in the local congregation, which is the only divinely instituted form of church? Thirdly, and most importantly, did Walther's thesis shape the modern Missouri doctrine of church and ministry? Or, more fittingly, did Missouri's pre-conceived notions of the doctrine of church and ministry and their fear of hierarchy shape the understanding of Walther's eighth thesis?

What did Walther mean when he said, "...and from it stem all other offices"?

The first question that needs to be asked is, "What did Walther really mean?" In order to

answer that question, we must be careful to note what Walther definitely did say, and what he did not say, so that false conclusions do not enter into our interpretation in taking a point too far or out of context.

A. The office of Pastor is the highest office in the Church

Walther does specifically state that the office of the Word, which is most remotely carried out by the Pastor, the office of overseer as St. Paul would state (Titus 1:7), is the highest office in the church. Walther writes, *“Hence, the highest office is that of the ministry of the Word, with which all other offices are also conferred at the same time.”* He then goes on to say about other offices within the church, *“Every other public office in the church is part of the ministry of the Word or an auxiliary office that supports the ministry, whether it be elders who do not labor in the Word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17), or the rulers (Romans 12:8) or the deacons...or whatever offices the church may entrust to particular persons for special administration.”*²

Here one is careful to note a couple of observations regarding Walther’s words. First, he makes a distinction between the Pastoral office and other offices within the church which do not carry out the same function (as to scope) as the Pastor in the local congregation. He notes a couple of offices which we would be familiar with today, namely the elders or the rulers which do not function in the proclamation of the counsel of God in the same way as the Pastor. Their function is different (again, as to scope) than the office of the Pastor.

There is much Scriptural and confessional evidence for this thesis of Walther. The reformers, at the time of the writing of the confessions, agree with him saying, *“denn das Predigtamt ist das höchste Amt in der Kirche.”*³ The Scriptures also speak of the very distinct office of the Pastor, distinct from other roles in the church when he writes in 1 Timothy 3:1-2, *“If anyone sets his sight on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.”*⁴ Hence, if the Scriptures can

make such a distinction, especially as they demand certain characteristics of those who hold the office as opposed to other forms of the ministry (1 Cor.12:8-10), then we can rightly say, along with the apologists and Walther, that the ministry of the Word, the Pastoral office is the highest office in the church.

However, an over-emphasis of the point has led many leaders and theologians in the Missouri Synod to claim that the Pastoral office is the *only* inspired office to which Christ gives the full authority to administer the ecclesiastical rites and the means of grace to the members of his Church. Wilhelm Oesch, a theologian from Ft. Wayne and a proponent of these old-Missourian views of church and ministry, supported the preceding theory when he wrote, “...to this very day, the congregation is the only external form where the command of Christ to teach all that He commanded, baptizing and administering the Lord’s Supper and the office of the keys is actually carried out and therefore the only form to which a believer can and must belong to be under the full sway of the gospel and himself to do what it commands (emphasis added).”⁵ With this statement, Oesch makes two points. First, that the church is the only external form of ministry where the means of grace, the Marks of the church are carried out *in their fullness*, and hence the only divinely inspired form of “church”. And second, that the only office which is able to carry out this task in the local congregation is the Pastoral office, since all other synodical offices and teaching offices do not *fully* carry out the responsibilities of the public ministry.

Does Walther really go so far as to say what Oesch so boldly proclaims? Walther does say that the office of overseer, the *Predigtamt*, is distinct from other forms of ministry, as all other forms of ministry stem from the *Predigtamt*. But did he really say that the Pastoral office is the only external form which Christ established to carry out the communication of the means of grace *in their fullness*? Certainly, there is not a greater visible example of the communication of

the means of grace and the carrying out of ecclesiastical rites than the Pastor. But can one go so far as to say, from the thesis of Walther and the inspiration of the Scriptures, that the Pastoral office is the *only* office that is divinely established and therefore divinely called? In this case, it seems that the old-Missouri doctrine has taken a broad statement of Walther about public ministry and used it to make a narrow application to THE public office of the Pastor.

B. There are auxiliary offices that support the work of the ministry

Walther is not shy in his thesis when he speaks about offices that stem from the highest office in the church, the office of the Word. Although, given the vagueness of his thesis, the door is left open for subjective interpretation, and therefore, misunderstanding. The question remains whether or not someone holding an office in the public ministry must function in connection with *every* aspect of the public ministry, especially in the administration and communication of the means of grace. To this point, Walther spoke of auxiliary offices and their function, *“Therefore, the offices of Christian day school teachers, almoners, sextons, precentors at public worship, and others are all to be regarded as ecclesiastical and sacred, for they take over a part of the one ministry of the Word and support the pastoral office.”*⁶

We, again, are careful to note what Walther does and does not say. He does say that certain offices function to hold up and support the pastoral office, especially because they have a direct connection in and to the primary function of the church. He does say that such offices are sacred and ecclesiastical in nature, because they (species) stem from the one ministry (genus) of the Word.

But, in defining the offices that are considered subordinate, the old-Missouri view has once again over-emphasized Walther’s point. Walther does not say that these offices which are subordinate, which are auxiliary, are not offices of the public ministry. He also does not say that

these auxiliary offices must function in every aspect of the public ministry that the Pastor does. Yet, having to be consistent in theology and practice, the Missouri Synod says, *“Always the office’s sphere of activity is its entire congregation, (That is, functioning in every aspect of the administration of the means of grace and ecclesiastical rites.), which shall be edified thereby. No other body, no office other than the ministry in the congregation carries all this out in such fashion with direct design.”*⁷

Thus, in reading Walther’s 8th thesis on church and ministry, the Missouri Synod, using the genus/species picture, sees the Pastoral office as the stem, the genus from which all other offices stem *as a species* of the office, but not the office itself. Where the Wisconsin Synod will differ is that it sees the ministry of the Word as a whole as the stem, the genus from which stems every form of the public ministry, both in narrow and wide sense. Theologian Dr. Kurt Marquart of the conservative wing of the Missouri Synod sits on the fence between the old-Missouri view and the view of Wisconsin... *“On the one hand, the term (pastoral ministry) can give the impression that pastoral ministry is simply one species among others of the same genus, “ministry”...On the other hand, if the “pastoral” aspect is pressed as the decisive, divinely instituted feature, then the discussion is too easily derailed into questions of authority, supervision and ranking, which are precisely the wrong issues. What is divinely instituted is not some particular pecking order (Luke 22:24-27), but the glorious and permanent (2 Cor. 3:11) ministry of life and justification.”*⁸

What we can extrapolate from Dr. Marquart’s statement is that the Missouri Synod, as a whole, does not presently have a solid stance on the subject of the office of the Pastor and the function of auxiliary offices in the ministry of the local congregation. Even proponents of the old-Missouri viewpoint, in quoting Luther, contradict themselves. Oesch quoted Luther often

without realizing that Luther, along with Walther, did not actually say that auxiliary offices are not offices within the scope of the public ministry. Oesch quotes Luther as saying, *“When the office of the Word is entrusted to a person, then he is entrusted (responsible for) all the offices that are carried on in the church through the Word...For the office to preach the Gospel is the highest among all (mirroring Walther and the confessors), for it is the true apostolic office which lays the foundation for all other offices.”*⁹

Here, Luther most clearly points out what the primary point of Walther’s thesis is. Yes, the office of Pastor, because he is directly and actively involved in constant proclamation of Law and Gospel, because he is directly and actively involved in the spiritual lives of his flock, by virtue of the divine call extended by the church, is the highest among all the offices. Yet, other offices, though they do not function in *all* aspects of the Pastoral ministry, though they do not function as readily and visibly as the Pastoral office, truly have their foundation in the responsibilities of the Pastor, who guides and directs them spiritually in the affairs of the church. All of the offices share in the responsibility of carrying out the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

C. The office of ministry of the Word functions most directly and visibly in the local congregation.

It stands to reason that, if the office of the Pastor is very rightly the highest among all the offices in the church, then also his scope of responsibility, the local congregation in most instances, is where he will function in that highest office most directly and visibly. However, one is careful at this juncture to note that Walther does not directly address this point. In his eighth thesis, Walther speaks primarily of the offices and their functions, and secondarily of the function of the local congregation and the church at large.

Since the Missourians over-emphasize the point that Pastors are the only divinely

instituted office and that all others are not truly under the term “ministry”, and since they stress that the person in the office of the Word must function in *all* aspects of the public ministry, exercising full ecclesiastical power, then the only person who holds an office in the church is the Pastor of the local congregation, as synodical officials and leaders do not *fully* function with ecclesiastical power in the communication of ecclesiastical rites and the administration of the means of grace. Oesch makes this point in trying to defend his position against a church-clergy hierarchy, *“Failure to recognize the distinction made by the MARKS between the congregational ministry and the ministry of the synodical superstructure results in the clergy becoming the dominating factor, constituting a virtual bureaucracy.”*⁴⁰ The marks, referring to the marks of the church, (where the Word is taught in truth and purity and the Sacraments rightly administered), are most clearly seen in the local congregation. That we can deduce without much problem. Yet, can we go so far to say, along with Oesch, that the marks of the church cannot be present at the District or Synodical level? Even Dr. Marquart disagrees, *“Those who urge that nothing beyond local congregation can really be a church, often do so without adequate theological reflection, simply in order to avoid the spiritual tyranny of a ‘superchurch’...”*⁴¹

Finally, Walther, in his excursus of thesis eight sets forth what is plainly understood as the God-ordained form of church, which does not find a visible form here on earth. He writes, *“A church may be wherever it will in the whole world (Note: not limited to localized congregation), yet it has no other Gospel or Holy Scripture, no other Baptism and Sacrament...(the MARKS of the church)”*⁴². Though it is a seemingly minuscule point, it is a point worth making that, once again, an over-emphasis of rationale has led to a position that robs the Holy Spirit of power in the means of grace in any ecclesiastical gathering outside of the local congregation. Walther disagrees. Luther disagrees. Even Dr. Marquart disagrees.

Part II: Did Thesis VIII help to shape the modern Missouri view of church and ministry?

What conclusion can we come to when we have all of this information before us? Simply put, Walther's eighth thesis is very vague in language. It leaves the door open for subjective interpretation. In many of the sources that this author read, statements that begin with, "I think..." or "I believe Walther meant..." were very prevalent. To make matters even more cloudy, it is the opinion of some excellent scholars that we couldn't know what Walther really meant due to modern skewing of his words. Marquart makes this point clear, *"I happen to believe, with the late Wilhelm Oesch, that C.F.W. Walther was the greatest ecclesialogist and the most faithful interpreter of Luther in the 19th century debate about church and ministry. The trouble is that not everything given out as Walther's position nowadays really was Walther's position."*⁴³ Hence, since we do not have a clear picture of what Walther truly meant, we have to look at Walther's words objectively, understanding what he did and did not say without importing our own thoughts and pre-conceived notions.

It seems very clear that the Missouri Synod view of church and ministry shaped the interpretation of Walther's words rather than Walther's words influencing the Missouri doctrine of church and ministry. One very obvious reason is that old-Missourians, (like Oesch), were deathly afraid of a church hierarchy that would have complete dominance over all aspects of the synod. Oesch's quote on page 7 makes that point abundantly clear. The pre-conceived notions of Oesch and others had to narrowly apply Walther's thesis because, in their reasoning, synodical officials, who oversee the affairs of the synod at large, had to be excluded from the pastorate so as not to create the "superchurch", or more directly, the "superapostle".

Secondly, in every case that we have seen, the Missouri Synod theologians, Oesch in particular, over-emphasized Walther's words by making narrow applications which, at face

value, were meant to be broader in scope. Both in the application to the ministry of the Word and the arena where that ministry is carried out, the Missourians have narrowed the application to include only the most visible and active form which Christ established, the Pastor and his local congregation, while subjugating, and sometimes leaving out, the auxiliary offices which are also mentioned throughout the New Testament, which *have their foundation* in the ministry of the Word.

Finally, what seems to be lacking is proper exegesis both of God's Word and of Walther's thesis. As we are careful never to say more than what Scripture says, so also in quoting a church father we are careful never to say what he has not said. We are also careful not to derive doctrine from the church fathers, whose words do not stand as inerrant words of our Heavenly Father. Only the Holy Scriptures are the *Norma Normans* from which we derive all of our doctrine. And, as to the Scriptures, the stance of the modern Missourians in regard to church and ministry, which says much more than what Walther intended in his eighth thesis, is not defensible either pragmatically or exegetically.

ENDNOTES

1. C.F.W. Walther, "Church and Ministry," (St. Louis: Concordia, 1987), p.22.
2. Ibid, p.290.
3. Concordia Triglotta, Apology article VIII, paragraph 43, *German*, p. 326.
4. New International Version
5. Wilhelm Oesch, "An Unexpected Plea", (Ft. Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1983), p. 66.
6. Walther, p.290.
7. Concordia Seminary, "Basic Documents of the Church and Ministry Discussions", The Faithful Word, vol. VII, #1, (Feb. 1970), p. 27.
8. Kurt Marquart, "The Church and her fellowship, ministry and governance", Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics IX, (Waverly, IA: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), p. 122.
9. Luther's Works vol. 40. p. 36.
10. Oesch, p. 77.
11. Marquart, p. 203.
12. Walther, p. 295.
13. Marquart, Letter to Christian News, July 21, 1986.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bente, F. et al. "Concordia Triglotta". St. Louis: Concordia, 1921.
- Coiner, Harry G. "The Pastor as Administrator of Church fellowship". Concordia Theological Monthly. Vol. XXXV, 1964, p. 271-283.
- Drevlow, Arthur H. "C.F.W. Walther: The American Luther". Mankato, MN: Walther Press, 1987.
- Fish, Rev. Robin D. "C.F.W. Walther: Theologian for the Layman".
www.confessinallutherans.org/papers/cfwfish.html
- Forster, Walter O. "Zion on the Mississippi". St. Louis: Concordia, 1953.
- Gerlach, Bryan M. "The Difference between the WELS and LCMS on the Doctrine of the Holy Ministry". Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. EF 787
- Grothe, Jonathan F. "Reclaiming Patterns of Pastoral Ministry". St. Louis: Concordia, 1988.
- Johne, Harold R. "The Doctrine of the Ministry with its Implications for the Staffing of DMLC".
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. EF 1084.
- Kleimola, Dr. Dale M. "The Relationship Between the Office of the Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers". Doctoral Essays on Church and Ministry. St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 2004.
- Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert. "The Book of Concord". Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- Lau, David. "The Relation of the Public Ministry and the Priesthood of All Believers in Regard to Current Lutheran Debates". CLC Journal of Theology. Vol. 35, 1995, #4.
- Lawrenz, Carl. "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Ministry". Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Vol. 79, 1982, p. 126.
- Marquart, Dr. Kurt. "Christian News". Letter to the editor: July 21, 1986, p. 9.
- Marquart, Dr. Kurt. "The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry and Governance". Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics. Vol. IX. Ft. Wayne: International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990.
- Moeller, Elmer J. "Concerning the Ministry of the Church". Concordia Theological Monthly. Vol. XXII, 1951, p. 385-416.
- Meyer, Carl S. "Walther Speaks to the Church". St. Louis: Concordia, 1973.

Nichol, Todd and Marc Kolden, editors. "Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of the Ministry". Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990.

Oesch, Wilhelm. "An Unexpected Plea". Ft. Wayne: Concordia Seminary Press, 1983.

Pieper, August. "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry". Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Vol. 59, 1962, p. 120-121.

Rengstorf, Karl Heinrich. "Apostolate and Ministry". St. Louis: Concordia, 1969.

Suelflow, Roy A., trans. "Selected Letters: Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther". St. Louis: Concordia, 1981.

Vogel, Heinrich J. "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry with Special Reference to Synod and its Discipline". Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Vol. 59, 1962, p. 81-135.

Vogel, Heinrich J. "The Doctrine of the Church and Ministry". Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File. EF 2749.

Walther, Dr. C.F.W. "Essays for the Church". Vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia, 1992.

Walther, Dr. C.F.W. "Essays for the Church". Vol. 2. St. Louis: Concordia, 1992.

Walther, Dr. C.F.W. "Kirche und Amt". St. Louis: Concordia, 1987.

Wicke, Harold E. "Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God-Ordained Office in the Church?" Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Vol. 68, 1971, p. 113-121.