

# Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God-Ordained Office in the Church?

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The *Lutheran Churches of the Reformation* are not the first to champion the above teaching as their position. In the past it was quite generally accepted as the teaching of *The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod*, although the fathers of that church body did not so consistently hold that position as we are sometimes led to believe. In the early years of this century the matter became a focal point of doctrinal discussions between the faculties of St. Louis and our Seminary, and was never totally resolved. At present there are two opinions still held in the Missouri Synod. The *Lutheran Churches of the Reformation* (LCR), however, insist that the pastorate in the congregation is the only God-ordained office in the Christian Church. They claim that by so teaching they are upholding the Biblical, old-Missouri doctrine. And so says also Pastor H. W. Romoser, administrator of the LCR and member of its Commission on Doctrine and Practice. He had upheld this position not only in discussions with the members of our Synod's Commission on Doctrinal Matters, but has now put it in writing in the August-November issue of *The Faithful Word, A Journal of Doctrine and Defense* in a detailed article entitled "The Church and The Ministry" (pages 30-68). This article, originally read to the LCR convention of July 7-9, 1970, was accepted by the representatives of the LCR without a dissenting vote. They have thus made it their official position and have, on that basis, suggested to their congregations that they no longer practice church fellowship with the congregations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod as being a church body which persistently holds to an unscriptural doctrine on the Church and the Ministry. This requires an answer.

This demands an answer not only because they accuse us of an unscriptural position, but also because their teaching undermines the position of many loyal and faithful servants of the Word in the Church of Jesus Christ. Is the teacher in our Christian day schools a servant and minister of the Word, or not? Is the professor in our church colleges and our Seminary a servant of the Word, or not? Is the president of our Synod a servant of the Word, or not? Is the editor of our church paper a servant of the Word or not? It is clear that they are not parish pastors. The LCR seeks to meet the thrust of these and similar questions by claiming that many-but not all-of these positions and functions are assistants to and branch offices of the one divinely ordained office in the church, the pastorate. However, according to their teaching, it is questionable whether even assistant pastors, or associate pastors, are incumbents of that one divinely ordained office in the church. They are relegated to an inferior position, at best, branches of the one divinely ordained office. But just which Scripture permits such distinctions, giving the LCR and others the right to make these and other servants of the Word less sure of their position as servants of God? Such a distinction can easily lead back to the hierarchical system espoused by Rome, where one position is considered as being superior to another. Christ has bid all of us be brethren.

Though the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation insist that our Wisconsin Synod in teaching that all of these positions are functions of the one ministry of reconciliation given to the church is teaching a new doctrine, one deviating from the Confessions and the Scripture, it is actually their doctrine that does not agree with Scripture, and is thus an innovation in the church of God, even as the hierarchical development of the past also was a departure from the clear Word of God. Nor do they agree with what Luther and the early dogmaticians of the Lutheran Church taught. In teaching thus, the LCR follows in the footsteps of those who in this particular item misread their great teacher, Dr. C. F. W. Walther. This is not surprising, since Walther himself in this matter did not speak consistently. Their position involves transferring a contemporary situation into the past contrary to what is presented in Holy Scriptures. This is eisegesis, not exegesis. It involves both rejecting that which Luther and the Lutheran fathers found taught in Scripture, and rejecting that which Scripture reveals as the actual situation in the apostolic church.

Scripture distinguishes between the priesthood of all believers and the public servants of the church in the area of Word and doctrine. I Peter 2:9 states: “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” In I Timothy 5:17 we read: “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine.”

But just who are these elders that work in the Word and doctrine? Is the only office of the Word and doctrine appointed and ordained by God that of the congregational pastorate as we know it today? Are those who teach children the Word and doctrine excluded from the ministry unless they are parish pastors? If so, then the question must be asked whether the Christian congregation is at all within its rights when it appoints men to other offices or apportions the various duties connected with the Word and doctrine to various men, clearly defining their areas of responsibility? Or are all those-except parish pastors -usurpers? After all, if the emphasis is on the *one* office as the only one appointed by God, then we as the followers of God ought to be careful to limit the exercise of the Word and doctrine to no more than this one office, allegedly so designated by God. Otherwise we would be going beyond what God allows and setting ourselves up as such who know better than God! It is this aspect of the case which I believe has not been honestly faced by those who insist on the word *one* in this connection. The addition of the word *one* in reference to the doctrine of the ministry is not Scriptural, as was the addition of the word *allein* (only) by Luther when he translated Romans 3:28 as, “So halten wir es nun, dass der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, *allein* durch den Glauben.” The *allein* (only) in this passage is already contained in the word *ohne* (without) which excludes everything but faith. There is no such parallel as we turn to the doctrine of the ministry. Nor is there a single passage in the Scripture which limits the ministry in the congregation to the pastorate as we know it today.

The New Testament ministry is expressed in general terms in the great mission command of our Lord: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20) . Likewise in 11 Corinthians 5:18, 19: “And all things are of God who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” The administration of this Word of reconciliation is not limited to Paul. It would at least include Timothy (II Cor. 1:1), who was neither an apostle nor the pastor of a congregation. If, however, after the death of the apostles the function of the ministry was to be limited solely to the parish pastor - and one, at that! - it would have been necessary to state this clearly lest a church such as Corinth continue in its own method of administering the New Testament ministry, one so different from our way of doing it today.

The fact is that Scripture itself teaches that the ministry of the Word has many forms. In Ephesians 4, Paul enumerates the men whom the exalted Christ has given to His church as His gifts in the area of the Word and doctrine: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11, 12). (Cf. also I Cor. 12:28.) Since these men are gifts given by Christ to His church, it is manifestly not wrong to say that they are all ordained of God to serve Christ’s church with the Word of the Gospel. It is clear that in this passage the ministry of the Word is not limited by Paul to the pastorate as we know it today, as though that form and no other were ordained by God. This is true even if the word *pastor* in the above passage were to be understood as identical with the parish pastor today, something, however, which would be a pure assumption.

There is no evidence in Scripture that the pastorate in the Apostolic Age was a one-man affair as it usually is in Christian congregations today. In fact, Biblical evidence goes in the opposite direction. In the early church the ministry of the Word in the congregations seems usually to have been a team situation, and nowhere are we actually told how the various phases of that work were divided between the various incumbents of the one ministry. To the congregation at Philippi, Paul and Timothy write: “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the *bishops and deacons*” (Phil. 1:1) .One congregation, but many bishops and deacons. Clearly this was an adaptation of the system used in the

Jewish synagogue. And the latter, it must be pointed out, was not an arrangement that had been ordered by God in the Old Testament, but one devised by the saints of the Old Testament in their liberty as children of God. In many areas the saints of the Old Covenant were hemmed in by ceremonial laws, but not in this area in which the Word and doctrine were applied directly and immediately to the individual and congregation. What is more, our Lord in His earthly life gave this arrangement His wholehearted sanction by making use of it in hearing the Word and by Himself preaching the Word in the synagogues. The God-ordained forms of the Old Testament worship, however, were discontinued in the New Testament as having served their purpose, being fulfilled in Christ Jesus. We learn this from Colossians 2:16, 17: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come, but the body is of Christ.” Not only were the forms of worship ordained by God discontinued, but the priesthood itself was abolished. From the Epistle to the Hebrews we learn that Christ alone is our high priest and that His sacrifice was the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

Philippians 1:1 is not the only passage which speaks of more than one man occupying the ministry of the Word in a congregation. This was equally true of the congregation at Ephesus, as is evident from Paul’s dealing with the leaders of that church in Acts 20. In verse 17 we read: “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders (*presbyterous*) of the church.” He speaks of the elders in the plural also when he enlarges on their work as spiritual overseers of the flock: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers (*episkopous*), to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20: 28) . This was not just a church council, but a corps of men together administering the ministry of the Word at Ephesus, for they are told to “feed the church of God.” Associates, if you will. Just how does this agree with the insistence of the LCR and others on the one-man pastorate as the one and only divinely appointed office in the church?

The argument is sometimes heard that Paul after all speaks in the singular in I Timothy 3:1, where he writes: “If a man desire the office of a bishop . . .” It is unwarranted to leap from the use of the singular in setting forth the qualifications those must have who are chosen for this office to an insistence on the singular in the exercise of this office in the church. In fact, it involves closing the eyes to the way Scripture describes the actual situation and involves reading our contemporary situation back into the Scripture itself. Paul in this passage says nothing about the way in which the duties of the ministry are divided, only about the qualifications of those who carry out these functions.

The outstanding example of a congregation in apostolic times which did not carry out the pastorate as we do, is the congregation in Corinth, to which Paul addressed two of his letters. Though Paul severely took this congregation to task for some of the aberrations that were invading it - among others the disorder prevalent in connection with the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar - he did not criticize them for the way in which they had ordered the ministry in their midst. Corinth, as we learn from the words of Paul, in many respects followed the order of the synagogues of that day. As a result, the services at Corinth were conducted much differently than they are in our congregations. Yet Paul did not forbid this way of conducting worship services, but simply reminded them that all things were to be done decently and in order.

It is enlightening to read Paul’s words in I Corinthians 14, for they reveal that in the Corinthian congregation many persons proclaimed the Word in the church services. No mention is made at all of having just one ordained pastor for the group, a strange lapse if the LCR position is to be considered as Scripturally valid. Paul writes: “How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying. If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at the most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret. But if there be no interpreter, let him keep silence in the church .... Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted . . . . For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints . . . . Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:26-40) .

It is well to recall what Luther says in connection with I Corinthians 14 in his 1532 *Brief von den Schleichern and Winkelpredigern* in which he defends the position of the called clergy. He writes: “Although this custom has ceased, that the prophets or preachers thus sit in the church and speak one after the other (as St. Paul here states), nevertheless some evidence and traces of it remain, namely, that in the chancel the liturgy is sung antiphonally, that the lessons are read successively, and that then the antiphon, hymn or response is sung collectively. And if a preacher would translate the other’s lesson and still another would explain it or preach about it, then it would indeed be the right way of exercising the ministry in a congregation such as that mentioned by Paul. For there some sang or read in a strange tongue, the other translated it, the third expounded it, and another again substantiated it or enlarged upon it with other passages and illustrations . . . . But I do not advise that this way of doing things be reinstated and that the office of preacher (*Predigtstuhl*: chair of preaching) be discontinued; in fact, I would help prevent that. For the people are just too unruly and impertinent, and it is just possible that the devil would come in between the pastor, preacher and chaplain, so that the one would want to be superior to the other, and that also they would fight with one another before the people, and each one would want to be the best. Therefore it is better to retain the office of the pastor (*Predigtstuhl*), for then things are done honorably, as Paul here teaches . . . . For Paul does not insist that we must follow a certain system, but does insist that everything be done decently and in order, and then gives this as an example. Since our system in preaching is more orderly among our people than that, we should retain our way of doing things” (St. L. XX, 1675f) . Luther recognized the great difference between the way the ministry was handled in the Corinthian congregation and the way it was handled in his day. But he did not object to adopting the Corinthian way of doing things because there is allegedly only one God-ordained office in the church.

The same apostle who by the Spirit of God wrote to the Corinthians also later wrote to Titus. Let us not make him say something in his Epistle to Titus that would put him at odds with what he had already written in First Corinthians. This is what we must keep in mind when the attempt is made to read Titus 1:5 as a direct institution of the pastorate in its present form. Besides, even in this passage the words for elders (*presbyterous*) is again in the plural: “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain *elders* (*presbyterous*) in every city, as I had appointed thee.” In the following verses he lists the qualifications of a *bishop* (*episkopos*), thus using the words for *elder* and *bishop* interchangeably. Congregations needed to be properly manned by qualified men. Just how the work was divided between the various bishops or elders is never stated. All, however, were required to “hold fast the faithful Word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gain-sayers.”

From what Scripture states about the apostolic church it is clear that these words of Paul to Titus cannot be taken as words of institution for the pastorate as we know it today. They apply to all who labor in the Word and doctrine. There is not one specific word in Scripture that states that the pastorate as we know it today is the one and only office of the Word instituted by our Lord and Savior. Keep in mind the situation at Corinth and Paul’s word concerning the men who are the gifts of the exalted Lord to His church. The Lord has commanded His church to preach and teach, has. commanded her to commit this office to qualified and faithful men, but has left the actual way in which this is carried out to the decision of His saints. The men whom the church then appoints to do this blessed works are the servants of God. We do, however, recognize that the primary form which the ministry will usually take is that of the congregational pastorate. Nevertheless, “there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord” (I Cor. 12:4, 5) . But to restrict the ministry of the Word to the pastorate as we have it today and to say that this is the only God-ordained form of that ministry is simply not Scriptural. It is going beyond the Scriptures.

To claim that the Lutheran Confessions support this position is to read them in a way which violates the understanding of the ministry as held by the man who wrote a number of the Confessions and whose doctrine was expounded in them - Dr. Martin Luther. We close with a pertinent quotation from his sermon on sending children to school, a sermon preached in July 1530. In it he says: “I indeed hope that the believers, and those who want to be called Christians, surely know that the spiritual estate is instituted and ordained by God, not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood and bitter death of His own Son, our Lord Jesus Christ .... He

paid a great price, so that we might have in all the world the office to preach, baptize, remit, bind, give the sacraments, comfort, warn, admonish with God's Word, and whatever more belongs to the office of a *Seelsorger* . . . . I do not mean the present spiritual estate in monasteries and chapters .... But that estate I mean, which has the office of preaching (*Predigtamt*) and service of the Word and sacraments, which gives the Spirit and all salvation, which one cannot gain through liturgics and pageantry, namely, the pastorate, teacher, preacher, reader, priest, i.e., chaplain, sexton, school teacher, and whatever else belongs to such offices and persons, which estate the Scripture praises highly. St. Paul calls them God's stewards, and servants, bishops, doctors, prophets, and in addition, 'ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God' (II Corinthians 5: 20) " (St. L. X, 423 f). That is the Lutheran position. That is biblical.