

# **The Path of the Evangelisch-Lutherischen Freikirche (ELFK) into the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) and the Doctrine of Church and Ministry**

*By Gottfried Herrmann*

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## **1. The Connection to the Synodical Conference - 1872-1963**

As early as the 1850s Professor C.F.W. Walther, the long-time president of the Missouri Synod, worked very hard for an association of the confessional Lutheran Synods in North America. In July of 1872 when the “Evangelisch-Lutherische Synodalkonferenz” was founded in Milwaukee, the following synods belonged to the conference as members: the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, the Ohio Synod and the (old) Norwegian Synod.<sup>1</sup> The Synodical Conference was drawn up as an alliance of churches. A strict commitment to the Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions formed its foundation. Unlike other similar alliances<sup>2</sup> it was the intention of the Synodical Conference to express this alliance also in the practice of the church, therefore every form of unionism was excluded.

In the years following 1870 “free Lutheran” congregations in Germany arose in the realm of the Lutheran State Church, too.<sup>3</sup> This was the case first of all in Saxony.<sup>4</sup> The first free church congregations were formed there in 1871. In 1876 those congregations allied themselves to form the Evangelisch-Lutherische Freikirche (ELFK). Because there was no Lutheran pastor in Germany who was in a position to serve these congregations, they finally called Pastor Friedrich Ruhland (1836-1879) from the Missouri Synod. He was also elected in 1876 to be the first president of the ELFK. From the very beginning there was an active exchange with the Missouri Synod, some of whose founding fathers had originally emigrated out of Saxony. Until World War I almost all of the young pastors of the ELFK received their education at the Missouri Synod seminaries.

Through the Missouri Synod the ELFK shared pulpit and altar fellowship from the very beginning with the other synods (e.g. Wisconsin Synod) in the Synodical Conference too. The relationship with the other synods was perhaps not quite as close as the relationship with the Missouri Synod, however, there was still a continuous exchange between them.<sup>5</sup> Representatives of the American sister-churches also visited the synodical meetings of the ELFK. In 1904, Franz Uplegger, who had served as a pastor of the ELFK in Hamburg, accepted a call into the WELS and was later heavily involved in the establishing of the Apache Mission in America.<sup>6</sup> During World War I two seminary graduates from the WELS studied in Germany. They kept in contact with the ELFK and eventually came to serve her as pastors. Dr. Heinrich Koch (1889-1984) served as a pastor of the ELFK in Berlin and served also from time to time as professor at the theological seminary in Kleinmachnow (Berlin-Zehlendorf). Professor Paul Peters (1888-1979) taught at the ELFK seminary as Professor of Old Testament from 1924-1939.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Slovak Synod was added to their numbers later, in 1908. On the other hand the Ohio Synod (1881/82) and the Norwegian Synod (1883) left the Synodical Conference as a result of the Election Controversy. A part of the Norwegian Synod came back into the Conference in 1920 as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

<sup>2</sup> E.g. the General Council in North America, which was founded in 1866.

<sup>3</sup> Such congregations had already been formed as early as 1830 in protest against the union of the Lutheran and reformed churches (e.g. the Altlutheraner in Silesia).

<sup>4</sup> Also later in Lower Saxony (Hermannsburg).

<sup>5</sup> That was not a problem, for the LC-MS and the WELS spoke primarily German until the 1920s.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gottfried Herrmann, *Die theologische Entwicklung der WELS unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Lehre vom Predigtamt*, in: *Theologische Handreichung* 1998, Vol. 2, pp. 2f (English translation of this article in: *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 1999, Vol. 96, Num. 2, pp. 103f).

<sup>7</sup> Professor Georg Mezger from the LC-MS also served at the seminary in Kleinmachnow until 1931.

The exchange between the synods certainly did not limit itself to personal contacts. The ELFK took notice of the debates over the doctrine of Church and Ministry that were stirred up by the Wauwatosa theologians of the WELS. Several documents from the 1920s and 30s allow this fact to be clearly recognized (cf. point 3.3).

After the second World War seminary graduates from the WELS studied in Germany at the newly established seminary in Oberursel,<sup>8</sup> too (e.g. Paul Eickmann). In 1953 the members of the ELFK in Poland who had evacuated Poland and who had come to eastern Germany were accepted into the ELFK in the form of the Diaspora District.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. The Founding of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) - 1993**

In the 1940s and 50s the Missouri Synod (LC-MS) started down the path of false ecumenism. There were some close contacts with churches that are now members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). Biblical criticism started to work its way into the seminaries in St. Louis and Fort Wayne (Springfield). This course towards liberalism created tensions within the Synodical Conference. The attempts for unanimity failed.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the small Norwegian Synod terminated her church fellowship with the LC-MS in 1955. The break between the WELS and the LC-MS occurred in 1961. The Synodical Conference came to an end in 1963/1967. In 1969 the LC-MS established pulpit and altar fellowship with the liberal American Lutheran Church (ALC).<sup>11</sup>

The break-up of the North American Synodical Conference affected confessional Lutheranism all over the world. A number of cases of “triangular fellowship” developed as a result of the break-up. That means: most of the free churches now stood in fellowship with both the WELS and the LC-MS, even though these two synods had ended their fellowship with one another.

A few European free churches felt obliged to reconsider their relationships with the LC-MS. Only the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland (Suomen Tunnustuksellinen Luterilainen Kirkko—STLK) took resolute action. In 1970 she terminated her church fellowship with the LC-MS. The ELFK in Germany declared that she could only maintain her relationship with the LC-MS in a state of protest.

In the middle of the 1970s the LC-MS started to change her course under the leadership of President Jack Preus. Biblical criticism was able to be somewhat suppressed, at least in the seminaries. That gave rise to a renewed hope among the European free churches. Unfortunately, however, the stance of the LC-MS remained unclear, above all in regard to the question of church fellowship. The LC-MS stood (and stands still today) in pulpit and altar fellowship with churches that belong to the LWF. Through that fellowship agreement she also stands in fellowship with all liberal Lutheran state churches.<sup>12</sup> In addition, it is common practice in many LC-MS congregations that members of other churches are allowed to receive communion, in spite of the fact that the LC-MS does not stand in pulpit and altar fellowship with them.

The former sister churches of the LC-MS in America perceived this problem clearly. Therefore they worked intensely in the 1970s to establish contact with the European free churches. Representatives of the WELS and the ELS visited Germany. In Germany the Selbständige (Independent) Ev.-Luth. Kirche (SELK) had

<sup>8</sup> The Lutherische Theologische Hochschule in Oberursel (by Frankfurt/Main) was founded in 1948 as a joint effort of the ELFK and the Altlutherische Kirche. Today this school is the seminary of the SELK. Since 1953 the ELFK has educated its pastors in Leipzig at its Lutherisches-Theologisches Seminar.

<sup>9</sup> The Polish Free Church arose in 1924 in close connection with the WELS. The following generation of pastors for this church received its education at the ELFK seminary in Kleinmachnow.

<sup>10</sup> Among other attempts, the attempt of the Overseas Committee in the first part of the 1960s, in which Prof. Wilhelm Oesch of the ELFK was involved.

<sup>11</sup> This fellowship lasted until 1981. In 1987 the ALC merged into the newly founded Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to the daughter churches of the LC-MS (e.g. in Nigeria, Hong Kong, and India) this includes church fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ingria (Ingermannland)

come into being in 1972 as a result of the fusion of the three largest Lutheran free churches in Germany.<sup>13</sup> Discussions took place between the WELS and the SELK in 1973-74 with the intention that the two establish pulpit and altar fellowship.<sup>14</sup> However this goal could not be reached, because the leaders of the SELK could not agree on a clear rejection of biblical criticism (the historical-critical method). On the other hand, the theme of “Church and Ministry” did not lead to an impasse during these discussions. There was agreement in this doctrine already after the first round of discussions.

Until the founding of the SELK in West Germany (1972) the contacts that the ELFK had with her foreign sister churches were maintained for the most part through the western part of the free church. It would take time before the connection to the rest of the free church in East Germany (German Democratic Republic) could be established again. Delegations from the WELS and the ELS visited their sister church behind the “Iron Curtain” for the first time in 1979. In those first discussions they spoke mostly about the “triangular relationships” which involved the LC-MS and the SELK. The representatives of the ELFK then conceded that such triangular relationships are not in line with Scripture and therefore cannot be tolerated for such a long period of time.

In 1986 a delegation from the WELS visited the ELFK in East Germany once again.<sup>15</sup> At this time they started talking about the plans of the WELS and the ELS for a new—but now world-wide—Synodical Conference. The ELFK supported this plan; however they asked for some time so that they could first clarify the problem of their triangular relationships. This clarification took place between 1989 and 1992 through the termination of church fellowship with the SELK and the LC-MS as well as with those churches that stood in fellowship with Missouri (France, England, Denmark, Finland).

As early as the meeting in 1986 it was requested by the ELFK, that they enter into discussions with the WELS over the doctrine of Church and Ministry. Questions concerning this doctrine had already long existed, and they received nourishment at the present time through recent publications of the Wisconsin Synod.<sup>16</sup> In the following years, representatives of both the ELFK and the WELS were regularly in attendance at each other’s synodical conventions. In 1989 they agreed to appoint delegations from each synod for the discussions.<sup>17</sup> These delegations carried on long conversations about the doctrine of Church and Ministry from 1990-94 in connection with the synodical conventions of the ELFK. In 1994 a report accepted by both sides about the discussions could be submitted. It declared that there were no grounds for either synod to accuse the other of false doctrine. This report led to an intensive study of this question within the ELFK (especially in the pastoral conference). The pros and cons were thoroughly considered. This process continues to some degree yet today.

After the positive results of the discussions with the WELS became clear, the path was paved for the ELFK to take part in the work of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC). The founding of this “new Synodical Conference” took place in 1993 in Oberwesel (Rhein), Germany. All of her (at the present tune) 16 member churches stand in pulpit and altar fellowship with one another. Their relationships with one another are not encumbered by triangular relationships.

### 3. The Discussion of Church and Ministry

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<sup>13</sup> The following churches merged into the SELK in 1972: the West German portion of the Altlutherische Kirche, the West German portion of the ELFK, and the old SELK. In 1976 the Ev.-Luth. Bekenntniskirche (the West German portion of the former Polish Free Church) joined and the East German portion on the Altlutherische Kirche followed suit in 1991.

<sup>14</sup> The following themes were discussed: 1) Creation and Evolution, 2) The Historical-Critical Method, 3) Church and Ministry, 4) Church Fellowship

<sup>15</sup> The representatives of the WELS at that time were: Professor Carl Lawrenz, Professor Armin Schuetze, and Pastor Martin Janke of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations (CICR).

<sup>16</sup> The reprints of articles by August Pieper (“Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” in WLQ 1989/1) and John Schaller (“The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry” in WLQ 1981/1) are all to be mentioned for example.

<sup>17</sup> Involved in these discussions were: Professor W. Gawrisch, Professor A. Schuetze, and Professor Strobel (WELS) and seminary rector Dr. Gottfried Wachler (until 1992), Pastor G. Dohler (until 1993), President G. Wilde, Pastor M. Hoffmann, and Pastor St. Müller (ELFK).

### 3.1. The Starting Point

Among confessional Lutherans in Europe and North America there is a deeply rooted prejudice against the Wisconsin Synod that has been handed down and even “cultivated” from generation to generation. It is the belief that the WELS represents a new—and in the end unbiblical—doctrine in regard to Church and Ministry. The critics point above all at the remarks of the so-called Wauwatosa theologians, who were active since about 1900 at the seminary of the Wisconsin Synod (Johannes Koehler, August Pieper, Johannes Schaller).<sup>18</sup> These professors did in fact give rise to an active discussion with the theme “Church and Ministry” before and after World War I. This discussion was carried on primarily with representatives of the Missouri Synod. Occasionally some remarks were made in the heat of battle that we might consider over-stated and even polemic. We will want to read these remarks with caution. It seems advisable that one sticks to the later, officially passed documents if he wants to pass judgment on the present doctrine of the WELS.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the Wauwatosa debate is difficult to understand if one does not keep in mind that the dispute over Church and Ministry had already taken up the entire nineteenth century. One of the great achievements of C.F.W. Walther is that, after occupying himself with Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, he went back to a biblical balance in this doctrine with his book *Kirche and Amt* (1852).<sup>20</sup> He emphasized that according to the evidence of the New Testament both the universal priesthood of all believers and the public ministry are to be regarded as instituted by God. By maintaining this truth he safeguarded himself from two false extremes:

- a) First of all, he rejected a romanizing theology of the ministry, which attributes more to the office of the public ministry than actually belongs to it (e.g. Martin Stephan, Johann Andreas Grabau, August Vilmar, Wilhelm Löhe).
- b) Secondly, he also rejected those views that recognize only the universal priesthood as being divinely instituted and make the office of the public ministry into a human institution (e.g. Richard Rothe, Johannes Höfling).<sup>21</sup>

These are principles that were accepted by the churches of the Synodical Conference and of course also by the Wauwatosa theologians. Nevertheless, after the death of Walther new questions arose. These questions went in two different directions:

- 1) The first question was in regard to the position of teachers in the church. The Lutheran synods in North America had (and still have today) a wide-spread network of schools. At the end of the nineteenth century the discussion began of how the office of the teacher is to be classified.<sup>22</sup> One side maintained that teachers occupy only a purely human office of helping that proceeds from the office of the pastor or parents. Others emphasized (e.g. J. Koehler) that teachers also serve in the schools of the congregations on behalf of the congregation (i.e. publicly) with the means of grace (i.e. with the Word) and therefore their call could stand on its own and was not less divine than the call of the pastor.
- 2) The second question dealt with the relationship between synod and congregation. Set off by the so-called Cincinnati Case (1904-1911), the question was debated, if and in what sense the synod is (or is not) “church”.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *The Wauwatosa Theology*. 3 Volumes, Milwaukee 1997; also Joel Pless, “The Doctrine of the Word of God According to the Wauwatosa Theology,” *WLQ* 1997/1, pp. 36ff.

<sup>19</sup> Above all should the *Doctrinal Statements* be mentioned here, which also treat the doctrine of Church and Ministry (latest edition 1997).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. to this point an assessment of Walther: Holsten Fagerberg, *Bekennnis - Kirche - Amt in der deutschen konfessionellen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Uppsala, 1952.

<sup>21</sup> Cf.: Gottfried Herrmann, *C.F.W. Walthers Beitrag zur Lehre von Kirche and Amt*. Theologische Handreichung 1999, Nr. 2.

<sup>22</sup> This is also connected to the fact that at this time women were increasingly working their way into this occupation; this was the case especially in the WELS.

### 3.2. The Doctrine of the Church

One of the fundamental realizations that C.F.W. Walther and the Missourians came to in the first stages of their synod was that every congregation is “church” (*ecclesia*) in the full sense of the word. A congregation does not have to belong to a church body (e.g. synod, state church) in order to be “church.”<sup>23</sup> Every place where the word of God is preached in its truth and purity and where the sacraments are administered according to their institution is church (Augsburg Confession 7), for God never lets his word return to him empty (Is 55:10f).

Walther also knew that beyond the congregation—on the foundation of a common confession—an association of congregations is sensible. We can see that in his life-long effort to establish cooperation both within the synod and also between synods. However, he never grew tired of emphasizing that such unions are human institutions (*iure humano*)<sup>24</sup> and are based upon free will.<sup>25</sup>

Walther’s legitimately placed emphasis upon the congregation led to the misunderstanding that **only** the congregation is truly “church” and that she is able to claim a divine right for herself. Disagreements then arose when questions about church discipline and doctrinal discipline came to the table to be clarified.

- In the Cincinnati Case a district convention of the Missouri Synod declared a congregation’s decision to excommunicate a member as invalid. That led to the dispute, whether or not a synod has the right to carry out church discipline.
- In the 1960s, as liberalism was creeping into the LC-MS seminaries, a dispute arose over doctrinal discipline. At that time some maintained that a synod simply does not have the right to carry out doctrinal discipline with false-teaching professors because a synod is only a human institution. Only congregations to which the professors belong may deal with such matters.

Both of these instances show that things here were set up in opposition to each other, when there were actually no contradictions at all. Of course the synod is also “church” (namely, an *ecclesia composita*), because Christians also gather as a synod around word and sacrament to do work in the kingdom of God. As such the synod also has the right to carry out the assignments (e.g. doctrinal discipline) that the congregations delegate to her. In questions of doctrinal discipline, the regulations of the church must govern the scope of that assignment.

For many, the answer to this question of synod and congregation has always been obvious. So-called “synodical calls” have been commonplace in most Lutheran free churches for decades. That means that a synod or a church district may call people into the public ministry just as congregations do.<sup>26</sup>

However, it becomes more difficult when one applies this principle to groups in the congregation or in the church. An extreme example: can we also say that a mission organization in a congregation or a church youth group or a church choir is “church” (*ecclesia*)? Now the opinions begin to vary.

Some say: “No, because such groups are not congregations that regularly gather around the means of grace. The New Testament grants the name “church” (*ecclesia*) only to such a congregation.”

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Walther’s Theses for the Altenburger Disputation of 1841: M. Günther, *Dr. C.F.W. Walther*. St. Louis, 1880; pp. 44ff.

<sup>24</sup> German: *menschlichen Rechts*.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Walther’s *Synodalrede* of 1848: C.F.W. Walther, *Lutherische Brosamen*. St. Louis, 1876, pp. 517ff. cf. also: Franz Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*. St. Louis; 1920, Vol. 3. pp. 483ff.

<sup>26</sup> In the ELFK in 1960 a “Richtlinie für Synodal- und Bezirksberufe” (“Guiding Principle for Synodical and District Calls”) was passed. Therein we read: “We do not call into question that our entire church and its districts also possess the authority to call servants of the Word. Since congregations that regularly gather around Word and Sacrament and in which the One Church therefore is present stand behind this practice, also the larger federation is an organ that has that authority. The congregations and federations of congregations—which are identifiable through the means of grace—have received the keys only from the One Church (cf. Einigungssätze III A, 1.2), correspondingly only for the One Church, so that some things, which are a part of the office of the keys, *can* not only be applied in larger frameworks, but also *must* be, in order to carry out the assignment of Christ.”

Others say: “Also to these groups of Christians Jesus’ words apply, ‘For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them’ (Mt 18:20). They do not come together as a worldly singing group, but as believing Christians, who, for example, want to proclaim the word of God in song. Of course they also are members of local congregations.”

When we look in the New Testament, we see that the name *ecclesia* is used the majority of the time for congregations in certain places (e.g. in cities). That is not too surprising, when one considers that the New Testament is written about the infancy of the first Christian congregations.

In one passage, *ecclesia* (in the singular form) stands for the church in Judea, Samaria and Galilee (Ac 9:31). Does that not point out to us that *ecclesia* can also be more than just a congregation, for example a synod? Those passages that show a plurality of called workers in one *ecclesia* point in this same direction (e.g. Ac 20:17; Phil 1:1).

Finally, the New Testament also mentions so-called “house congregations” in a few passages (e.g. 1 Co 16:9; Ro 16:5; Philemon 1:2). We do not know what kind of role these “congregations in the home of x” played. Were they **the** local congregations or just parts of them? In the New Testament we find very few concrete facts about the congregations. How big must a congregation be before she can claim the name *ecclesia* for herself? Must all of her members live in the same place? In how large of an area may they be scattered (Diaspora)? How often must they gather around the means of grace in order to be *ecclesia*? What does a “regular gathering” around the means of grace mean? Every Sunday? Monthly? Yearly?

If one considers these things he will protect himself from drawing hasty conclusions. The WELS does that when she emphasizes that certainly every group of Christians can be addressed as *ecclesia*, but on the other hand also maintains that these groups do not all carry the same weight.<sup>27</sup> Their significance depends upon how much the individual people and the church herself are edified in faith through the means of grace in the group. There are “primary groups,” in which the means of grace are offered regularly in all forms. Those groups are above all local congregations. However, next to those groups exist also “secondary groups” (e.g. youth groups, church mission organizations). These groups can exist only in connection with a primary group (local congregation, synod). Their service is not “fundamental” to the same degree. They neither have to be a part of every local congregation nor do they have to regularly meet. A synod or local congregation should pay careful attention that such groups do not presume rights that are not granted to them (e.g. administering the Lord’s Supper).

We Europeans are not accustomed to this “group understanding.” Some are bothered by it. However, we should not judge it according to our traditional understanding, but according to the Holy Scriptures.<sup>28</sup> If the understanding contradicts Scripture, then we must reject it. However, if it does not contradict Scripture, then we cannot reject it as false doctrine.

### 3.3. The Doctrine of the Public Ministry

Through the discussion of the classification of teachers the question arose: what belongs to the office of the public ministry and what does not?

C.F.W. Walther and other fathers of the Missouri Synod often used the terms *Predigtamt* and *Pfarramt* interchangeably. For example, Walther’s second thesis of the ministry reads: “*Das Predigtamt oder Pfarramt ist keine menschliche Ordnung, sondern ein von Gott selbst gestiftetes Amt.*”<sup>29</sup> That may lead one to draw the following conclusion: “Only the office of the parish pastor (*Pfarramt*) can claim for itself the divine institution.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Doctrinal Statements*, Chapter on Church and Ministry I,D,4: “(a)...Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, where they will desire to nourish their faith regularly through the means of grace, the local congregation will usually be the primary grouping of Christians.” And: “(c) 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...”

<sup>28</sup> The WELS has never demanded that anyone adopt the same terminology. For the WELS the necessary thing is that the biblical principle be carried out.

<sup>29</sup> I.e. *The office of the ministry or the office of pastor is not a human institution, but instead an office instituted by God himself.* Walther, *Kirche and Amt*. 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., Zwickau, 1894, p. 193.

All of the other offices are nothing more than human institutions and can exist only in subordination to the office of the pastor.” Walther even says in his eighth thesis of the ministry: “The office of the public ministry (*Predigtamt*) is the highest office of the church, out of which all of the other church offices flow.”<sup>30</sup>

However, it cannot be disputed that the term *Predigtamt* can express several different things in the German language.

- (1) Luther says occasionally that every Christian is a preacher of the gospel. With this expression he means that believers will be witnesses of the gospel. This is not to be confused with the office of the public ministry.<sup>31</sup>
- (2) In Article 5 of the Augsburg Confession we read, “That we may obtain this faith (described in Article 4), the ministry (*Predigtamt*) of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted...” Here the term *Predigtamt* is used *in abstracto*, i.e. it stands for the administering of the means of grace.<sup>32</sup>
- (3) Finally, the term *Predigtamt* is used often still today as a synonym for *Pfarramt*. *Pfarramt* can certainly also be used *pars pro toto* when *Predigtamt* (public service with the means of grace) is used in the broader sense of the word.

In respect to this question the Wauwatosa theologians have directed our eyes back to the testimony of Scripture. And we should follow them on this path. It really does not help us when we argue about the interpretations of our church fathers. As Lutherans we have to remember that Scripture is the *norma normans*.

There are many passages where the New Testament speaks about the office of the public ministry. For example:

Ac 20:28 - Keep watch over 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.

1 Co 12:28 - And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

Eph 4:11 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.

Tit 1:5 - The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

We could also add still more passages, e.g. 1 Pe 5:1-3; 1 Tim 3:1ff; 2 Tim 2:2.

All of these passages speak about the office of the public ministry. Different kinds of gifts and types of service are mentioned that are all related to one another. Some of the offices that are mentioned seem to match up with the present office of the pastor or seem to be similar to it (elders, overseers, pastors). But why is it then, that in some places elders or overseers appear in a plural form (Ac 20:17ff; Philippians 1:1)? Some questions here remain unanswered: Did they all work in one congregation or in several different congregations in the same place? Did each have his own area of work, an “area of expertise” that was different from the others? Did they all always work with all forms of the means of grace or did some only proclaim the Word? We simply do not know.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 342.

<sup>31</sup> The ambiguous phrase, “Every Christian is a minister” is justifiable here. It can be expressed with this phrase that every Christian should be a witness of his Lord. However, the danger also exists that the difference between the universal priesthood and the office of the public ministry can be blurred through its usage.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. to this point: Walther, *Kirche and Amt. Ibid.*, p. 194. The *Predigtamt* is first spoken of *in concreto* in Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession.

It is striking that a “direct” institution of the office of the public ministry is nowhere to be found in these passages.<sup>33</sup> Nowhere is it written that in every Christian congregation at all times the office of the public ministry is to be set up “in this way according to a certain form.”

Then where do we find the institution of the office of the public ministry? We read in Melancthon’s *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, Paragraph 10: “...the office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore the Great Commission (Mt 28:19) carries the most weight (*vor allem gilt*) as the institution.<sup>35</sup> Walther writes to this point: “The Lord clearly and plainly points out what kind of authority the *Predigtamt* that Christ instituted with the apostles has when he says, ‘Go and make disciples of all nations...’”<sup>36</sup>

We are dealing here with an “indirect” institution: what is here at first commissioned to the apostles applies on the one hand to all Christians (cf. 1 Pe 2:9) but also on the other hand to the office of the public ministry. Scripture passages like those cited above (Ac 20:28; Tit 1:5; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11; *et alia*) show how the apostles, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have put that into practice and carried it out “until the end of the age.” In congregations they commissioned individual people with the public administering of the means of grace. Evidently they did this in various forms.

When one keeps this in mind, he can avoid the danger of using single proof passages that prove the existence of the office of the public ministry in early Christendom to come to the conclusion that with these passages a certain form of the *Predigtamt* (the parish pastor) has been established for all time.

The Wauwatosa theologians stood firmly upon this recognition. It rings strange and revolutionary in our ears. However, we must also notice that this is not something new. The fathers of our ELFK had discussed it already in the 1920s and 30s. I would like to cite two examples:

- a) In 1921 Carl Manthey-Zorn wrote the following in an essay for our theological periodical *Schrift and Bekenntnis*: “In the office of the parish pastor (*Pfarramt*)—as it is set up now and as it was set up at the time of the writing of the Lutheran confessions—is included each and every function that the pastors<sup>37</sup> and teachers, elders, overseers (*Vorsteher, Regierer, Führer*) had according to Scripture as *Haushalter Gottes*. Therefore it is very well correct and faithful to Scripture that our confession translates ‘pastors and teachers’<sup>38</sup> as parish pastors (*Pfarrherrn*). The parish pastors (*Pfarrherrn*) are in fact and most certainly *Hirten* and *Lehrer* etc., even if **not only** the *Pfarrherrn* are *Hirten* and *Lehrer* etc. All parish pastors (*Pfarrherrn*) are *Hirten* and *Lehrer* etc., however not all *Hirten* and *Lehrer* etc. are parish pastors (*Pfarrherrn*).<sup>39</sup>
- b) Afterwards, in 1934 and 1936, the later Oberursel Professor Wilhelm Oesch wrote the following in presentations for the pastoral conference: “The holy office of the ministry is the office of the Word inside and out; it has been commissioned initially and immediately (*ohne Mittel*) to all of the righteous...In this sense is the phrase also true, that there is fundamentally only **one** *ministerium verbi divini*; therefore all called workers in the Word have fundamentally the same office...The phrase about the **one** divinely instituted office in the church leads [however] to difficulties if one starts out with the understanding that there is **only** the office of the parish pastor in the common sense of the word...” And later he adds: “I have...already elaborated upon the fact...that in the historical office of the parish pastor this

<sup>33</sup> Like we have direct institutions of baptism (Mt 28:19f- “baptize”) and of the Lord’s Supper (Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24ff - “this do”).

<sup>34</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche* (BSLK), p. 474 (only in the German text); *Triglotta*, p. 507.

<sup>35</sup> Walther is of the same understanding when he cites Mt 28:19ff as the sole scriptural proof in his third thesis of the ministry (which is about the continuation of the office of the public ministry) and does not include passages such as Ac 20:28, Tit 1:5 etc. We find these passages as scriptural proof in other theses.

<sup>36</sup> Walther, *Kirche und Amt*. p. 238.

<sup>37</sup> German: *Hirten*.

<sup>38</sup> German: *Hirten und Lehrer*.

<sup>39</sup> Zorn, *Das öffentliche Predigtamt innerhalb der Kirche*, in *Schrift and Bekenntnis*, 1921. pp. 79ff. (Emphasis by GH)



all-inclusive office exists. But the historical development has always placed the emphasis on the work in the parish and has had to do so. But now if the New Testament office is to be fully utilized, it is necessary that the office of the missionary be upheld. May we be reminded here of the many offices [in] 1 Co 12:28-32; Eph 4:11 and in the accounts in the book of Acts...”

Zorn and Oesch clearly hold fast that according to Scripture there can be other forms of the public ministry in addition to the office of the parish pastor. Even in our church it was never a problem to recognize professors of theology or missionaries as forms of the public ministry. There was (and still is) discussion solely about the question, to what extent offices on the congregational level are to be classified among these forms of the public ministry (e.g. school-teachers and religious instructors).

Here the question also arises, whether or not women should take such offices. It follows clearly from 1 Tim 2:12 and 1 Co 14:34 that the parish pastorate (*Pfarramt*) ought not be commissioned to women. It should be considered, however, that in both of these passages Paul refers to the role of man and woman in the order of creation (*Kephale* structure). Women ought not exercise authority over men. With these passages they are not denied every “public teaching” in general.<sup>40</sup> When they teach other women or children that does not contradict Scripture.<sup>41</sup>

If one takes the testimony of Scripture concerning the office of the public ministry seriously, then it can not be denied that this office can assume various forms. If some remarks of Walther and others in the Missouri Synod seem to contradict that, then that is because they occasionally did not speak clearly enough and because the term *Pfarramt* was occasionally used *pans pro toto* for *Predigtamt*. One can certainly do that, because the office of the parish pastor is without doubt the most important and fundamental form<sup>42</sup> of the public ministry. A pastor is usually commissioned with the ministry of all of the means of grace. Most often he also bears the responsibility for the spiritual care of the entire congregation (He 13:17).

However, teachers and religious instructors also work on behalf of the congregation<sup>43</sup> (that is, publicly) with the means of grace, i.e. the Word. How can we say on the basis of Holy Scripture, that they do not stand in the public ministry of the means of grace? Whoever disputes this turns something into law that is not clearly stated in Scripture. He then stands in the way of our Christian freedom, which allows the church to decide those things that God does not stipulate in his Word.<sup>44</sup>

While we say such things it must also certainly remain clear, that such offices (e.g. teacher, religious instructor) should not be confused with the office of the parish pastor. These calls are limited to the ministry that is delegated to them. Here, every church must establish the rules and regulations that will ensure that everything is done in a fitting and orderly way (1 Co 14:40). It seems to be advisable that we distinguish clearly between those offices on the synodical level and those on the congregational level.<sup>45</sup>

We return once again to our starting point. In this discussion about the office of the ministry quite a lot depends upon how certain terms are used. It leads to misunderstandings when one does not clearly define what one means. Because the term “public ministry” is ambiguous we should use it only according to a precise definition. Since the term *Predigtamt* is quickly bound with the term *Pfarramt* in Germany and Scandinavia, it seems advisable to me that we leave out the term entirely when we describe the offices of the New Testament and speak instead about the “public Ministry of the means of grace.” The Lord Jesus has instituted this ministry

<sup>40</sup> “Public” means here—as it always means in the context of Church and Ministry—not only the appearance in public, but the teaching on behalf of the congregation (Walther says: *von Gemeinschafts wegen*).

<sup>41</sup> We are reminded here of Luther, who had no problem allowing a woman to occupy the office of a preacher in a nun convent.

<sup>42</sup> The new edition of *This We Believe* says in regard to this (p. 30): “We look upon the pastoral office as the *most comprehensive form* of the public ministry of the Word” (Emphasis by GH).

<sup>43</sup> Finally, it is not the congregation that gives the assignment, but Christ the Lord through the congregation.

<sup>44</sup> It is nothing other than that which the WELS wants to express in her commonly misunderstood rejections in the *Doctrinal Statements* (11, D, 6, Antithesis): “We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.”

<sup>45</sup> As the ELS does in her recently discussed theses about “The office of the public ministry” (cf, primarily the commentary to these theses by G. Schmeling).

of the means of grace through the apostles in order to edify his church with the means of grace and to carry the gospel outside to the world.

Those acts of service in the congregation and synod that do not work with the means of grace are by all means to be distinguished from those that do (e.g. Ac 6; 1 Tim 5:18). These are certainly also “public” (i.e. on behalf of the congregation), but they are not a part of the *ministerium verbi*. With English language usage it can easily become confusing here when we speak very generally about “public ministry” or “called workers” without defining what we mean.