

The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry as Confessed in the WELS and Reflected in its Practice

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The scriptural truths of the church

The church is the communion of the saints. The church is the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit through the Gospel has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior, and whom through this gift of a common faith he has united with the Triune God and with one another to form one congregation (AC VII, VIII), one body, one blessed fellowship.

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

That the church is the communion of saints is already fully evident from Christ's first express mention of his church, his *ecclesia* (Mt 16:16-18). Here Jesus compares his church to a building whose individual building blocks are built upon a firm foundation. After two years of careful training Jesus at Caesarea Philippi formally asked his disciples: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" As spokesman of that twelve, Peter volunteered to answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." It was then that 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 hell [marg. reading] will not overcome it."

What is the rock upon which Jesus promised to build his church? It is clearly not the person of Peter, for Jesus points out that Peter did not come to the confession which he had just made by his own flesh and blood, his own spiritual ability. Neither is this rock any special office of Peter which he was later to pass on to others to form an unbroken succession of popes as Roman Catholicism vainly claims. Jesus indeed says of Simon son of Jonah that by virtue of his faith in Jesus as the promised divine Redeemer which he had just confessed, he was Peter, *Petros*, a building stone. Yet Jesus used a slightly different word when he spoke of the rock on which he would build his church; he used *petra*, a foundation rock. This foundation rock is none other than the one on which Peter had confessed that he and his fellow disciples were firmly grounded in faith, namely, Jesus the Christ, i.e. the promised Redeemer, the Son of the living God.

This entire discourse centers in Jesus, his true person, his office, his work. Building stones grounded on Christ as the foundation rock to form a part of the growing edifice of Christ's church were likewise all the other disciples whose faith Peter had also voiced as their spokesman. That is how Peter himself understood the word of Jesus. In his first epistle (2:4,5) he says: "As you come to him [i.e. Jesus] the living stone - rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

Paul's whole epistle to the Ephesians testifies that the church is the communion of saints. Paul with a jubilant heart speaks of God's eternal plan of grace in Christ to gather and perfect a church of believers from the midst of Jews and Gentiles as his eternal possession. We will have to content ourselves with quoting Ephesians

2:19-22:”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.”

The Ephesians Christians whom Paul was first of all addressing had for the most part formerly been pagan Gentiles. As such they had been steeped in spiritual ignorance without any saving knowledge of God and without any hope in the world. During God’s Old Testament dispensation the Mosaic law code had like a mighty wall separated all the Gentiles from the nation of Israel. In the midst of Israel God was then preserving his church of believers who trusted in his covenant promise of salvation. Yet Christ with the completion of his Savior’s work had fulfilled the Mosaic law code and thus broken down this middle wall of partition. With his perfect sacrifice for all sin Christ had reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God. This gospel of peace, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins through Christ Jesus, Paul had proclaimed at Ephesus. Through it the Holy Spirit had wrought faith in the hearts of the pagan Ephesians and thereby made them members of his church. Now they were no longer strangers and foreigners but fellow citizens with the saints. They now belonged to the household of God. Through Christ in whom they believed and through whom they were cleansed of their sin God was now their dear Father and they his dear children. Christ’s church is the communion of saints.

Also when the New Testament speaks of the church of God at a specific place, the reference is always to believers. Paul writes (1 Cor 1:2):”To the church of God in Corinth,” but he immediately adds: “to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ - their Lord and ours.” Paul is addressing his readers as the church of God because he is addressing them all as sanctified in Christ Jesus, as called to be holy, i.e. as saints, as believers. Similarly Paul addresses his first letter to the Thessalonians (1:1): “To the church of the Thessalonians,” but again adds: “in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” This addition marks also the members of this church as being in God the Father and the Lord Jesus as believers. Only in this sense is he addressing them as the church at Thessalonica. In addressing his letter to the church at Philippi he simply says: “To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.” In each instance the addressees, of course, do not form the whole Christian church, but the Christians at Philippi are for Paul the church, the communion of saints, as it was present at this specific locality.

Just because the church is the communion of saints, the gathering of all true believers, the church is invisible. In stating this we are admittedly using invisible in a very special meaning. Since believers are people, they as such are not invisible in the usual sense. Yet they are not discernible by us in their nature as believers. This specialized usage of invisible, which goes back all the way to Luther and which has been employed by along line of orthodox Lutheran theologians, still serves a helpful purpose. It helps us to hold on to three vital scriptural truths concerning the church: (1) that the bond of faith which unites us with God and with each other to form the holy Christian church is a spiritual bond; (2) that only God, who alone can search the human heart, knows who all the individual members of the holy Christian church are; (3) that during this time of grace we can therefore apprehend the holy Christian church as a precious reality only by faith on the basis of God’s Word.

St. Paul writes (Ro 10:10): “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” Again he says (2 Tm 2:19):”The Lord knows those who are his.” Not

only does the Lord discern their hearts but it is he who has set his heart upon them and through the gospel made them his own by faith and keeps them as his own. We who cannot discern hearts are to judge others on the basis of the profession of faith that they make in word and deed. Yet such a profession can be hypocritical. Hence the church cannot be equated with any individual church organization whose members can be determined and tabulated on the basis of their outward profession. Just as little can it be equated with the sum total of the membership of all such outward churches.

Still Christ's church, though invisible, is a blessed reality. It is not a mere platonic idea. Its members have been the object of God's gracious thoughts from all eternity. From all eternity God in his grace for Christ's sake has set his heart upon them individually and determined that they should in time become his own through the gospel and by the same gospel be kept in faith to eternal glory (Eph 1:1-4). In his high priestly prayer Jesus speaks of his believers, past, present and future, as very specific individuals. They are those whom the Father has given him. With Christ our victorious Savior sitting at the right hand of God everything that happens and will happen must somehow serve the gathering, completion and eternal glorification of his church of believers (Eph 1:19-23). The church is a reality that is to be a great comfort and concern for us (Eph 2:18-22; 4:1-16; 1 Cor 12).

The church, the communion of saints, is present there where the means of grace are in use, where the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. The gospel in Word and sacrament are the marks of the church. It is through the gospel in Word and sacrament that the church has received its life. All of its members have been born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word of God (1 Pe 1:23-25). Either through the gospel word proclaimed to them (Ro 1:16; Jn 6:63) or through the gospel already brought to them in the regenerating washing of Holy Baptism (Tt 3:5; Mt 28:19) the Holy Spirit has given them a spiritual rebirth and made them partakers of all the blessings of salvation. Through the gospel the spiritual life of all the members of his church is constantly nourished and sustained, even as the Lord prayed that his Father might grant this. To this end the Lord Jesus himself made added provision through the gracious institution of the Holy Supper of his true body and blood. Through the gospel the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

Not all, who hear the gospel, of course, believe. With sadness Jesus says of Jerusalem (Mt 23:37): "How often I have longed to gather your children together as hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you were not willing." Stephen (Ac 7:51) testifies of his hearers: "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit." Hebrews 4:2 voices a warning at the hand of some of the Israelites of Moses' time: "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did, but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith."

With the Augsburg Confession Article V, we properly confess: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through mean, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the gospel."

But the promise of the Lord stands that his word will not return to him void, without accomplishing that at which he pleases (Is 55:10,11). To the end of the age Christ promises to be effectively with us as we make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching (Mt 28:19,20). As we proclaim the gospel we can confidently say with St. Paul (2 Cor 2:14-16): "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal

procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.”

Hence Scripture bids us to look for the church there where the gospel is in use, where people are gathered together both to receive its blessings and to bring them to others. Christ promises (Mt 18:20): “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” This is a favorite Scripture passage in the WELS as it was that for Dr. C. F. W. Walther in his classic presentation of the church and its ministry. It is a basic Scripture statement concerning the presence of the church active in its unique function of the use of the keys of heaven. Scripture designates such gatherings of people who profess faith in Christ as the Savior and manifest it in the use of Word and sacrament as churches. When even two or three are gathered together in Jesus’ name the Savior is present with all the blessings of his saving grace. The two blessings of the Savior’s efficacious presence specifically singled out in the immediate context as enjoyed by those gathered in his name are the gracious hearing of their joint prayer and their effective wielding of the keys of heaven in binding as well as in loosing. Note that the Savior in this passage says nothing about the regularity or the frequency or the mode of being gathered together in his name as he holds out the promise of his gracious presence. To be gathered together in Jesus’ name is to be occupied with the revelation of his saving grace, with the gospel, both to receive its blessings and to bring them to others. All of God’s inspired Word comes into consideration, of course, since all of it somehow stands in close relation to the central gospel message, serves this message and the purpose for which it is given to us.

To natural man the gospel is foolishness. Natural man wants above all to enjoy the things of this world. He finds it too humiliating to be treated as a lost sinner who cannot come to God’s favor and get to heaven except through the pure grace of God as revealed in Christ’s vicarious work. He thinks that if heaven is offered as a free gift, sinners will no longer avoid sin. Unbelievers have no incentive to gather in Jesus’ name.

Through the Word the Holy Spirit makes believers aware, however, that until their dying day they possess the treasure of their spiritual life of faith in a bitter struggle against their sinful flesh. They realize that their faith is constantly being assailed by Satan and the unbelieving world. Thus they long for the Word of God as the bread of life that it may constantly nourish and renew their faith. For the strengthening of their faith they desire to have God’s pardon and grace sealed to them also in Holy Communion. To meet the temptations, trials and tensions of life properly with the power of the gospel Christians feel the need for the encouragement, warning, comfort and counsel of fellow believers. Faith-born love constrains them likewise to offer all this to others. With fellow believers they desire publicly to worship their God and Savior in prayer, praise and supplication. Faith-born love impels them to share the gospel richly with others. It is the Holy Spirit who gathers believers together in Jesus’ name. He does this not by legal precepts and compulsion, but by making them aware through the Word of their needs as Christians and by constraining them in their faith-born zeal to carry out their unique Christian mission of sharing the gospel with others.

When therefore we see people joined together to have the Word of God proclaimed to them, see them celebrating the sacrament of the altar, see them bringing their children to Holy Baptism, see them worshiping God with praise and supplication, see them exercising the ministry of the keys, even in Christian discipline and excommunication, see them joining together in the endeavor of bringing the gospel to the unchurched and the

heathen, find them gathering together also with other congregations for the purpose of training pastors, teachers and missionaries, find them pooling their resources and administering them to maintain the necessary church buildings, schools, colleges, seminaries for all these purposes - then all this indicates that at we are dealing with Christ's church, with the communion of saints.

The possibility, yes, the probability, is always there that some hypocrites will slip in among those who gather together in Jesus' name, people who for ulterior motives profess Christian faith that does not actually live, or no longer lives in their hearts. There was an Ananias and a Sapphira outwardly mixed in with the company of believers at Jerusalem. Hypocrites are like chaff among the wheat, outwardly adhering to the company of believers, but not a part of them. The presence of hypocrites presents no obligation for us. Only God can deal with them. Until God exposes hypocrites as not really belonging to the church they, too, are to be outward recipients of the believers' expressions of fellowship.

Thus when the New Testament speaks of the church or of churches, the reference is either to such as are known to God as believers - the *ecclesia stricte dicta*, the a communion of saints or a part of it present at any locality, or the reference is to such as are to be acknowledged as believers by us on the basis of their confession - the *ecclesia late dicta*, the church imperfectly apprehended by us, the empirical church.

The specific forms in which believers arrange for the use of the means of grace in public worship, the specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the fellowship and work of the church, the specific forms in which they establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord for his New Testament church.

One scans the New Testament in vain for a word of institution prescribing some specific form of gathering. We find no instructions to the believers to organize local congregations. As already pointed out, it is the Holy Spirit who through their faith prompts believers to gather together in Jesus' name. When Christians through the weakness of their flesh become lax in doing so, the Holy Spirit through the Word admonishes them (He 10:25): "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another."

Unlike the Old Testament with its Mosaic law code, its special discipline of ceremonial laws for God's Old Testament people, the New Testament has no binding legal regulations and prescriptions from God for his New Testament church beyond that which is embedded in the moral law, God's immutable holy will for all people for this earthly life (Ro 1 3:9,1 0; Mt 22:3 7-39).

Instead of finding specific forms legally prescribed for us in the New Testament church, we hear: "All things are yours" (I Cor 3:21). The church at Corinth was sadly divided in factions. One said: "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos." Each faction seemingly laid excessive stress on the particular methods, approaches and gifts of the individual laborers in the gospel ministry. The apostle reminded the Corinthians that the Lord had assigned each his task, that Paul and Apollos and Cephas had equally stood in their service. "All things are yours" applies also to the organization and administration of the New Testament church in its use of the means of grace for its inward and outward growth. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation and need.

Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, the local congregation will usually be the primary grouping of Christians. We say usually because during periods of severe persecution of the church that may not have been the case, and may not be the case where Christians are under severe persecution today. In the local congregation Christians will ordinarily desire to nourish their faith regularly through the means of grace and to that end establish the public ministry. Here they will want to enjoy the fellowship of fellow believers, serving one another in love. Here they will want to worship God publicly together and jointly share the gospel with others.

Local congregations did exist everywhere in the apostolic church. That is an undisputed fact. In Jerusalem there was the congregation of 3000 souls brought to faith at Pentecost, soon increased to 5000. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Many sold their possessions and goods so that distribution might be made to anyone in their midst who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts, even holding a common election of almoners. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with gladness and sincere hearts (Ac 2:42-46).

In Corinth we are told Paul worshiped with the believers in the house of a certain man named Justus (Ac 18:7). In Ephesus Paul, after having first testified in a synagogue, took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Ac 19:9). In Troas the disciples came together to break bread on the first day of the week and Paul preached to them in an upper chamber on the third story (Ac 20:7-9). Several times churches in private homes are mentioned.

The Christians living in a certain place were joined together and held divine services with singing, reading, preaching and the Lord's Supper. In Corinth they had the unique arrangement of sitting prophets who spoke in turns, two or three, while the others judged. The apostle did not change this arrangement but urged that everything be done orderly and in love. The arrangements apparently were not at all uniform everywhere. They differed according to circumstances and as the special spiritual gifts which God had given the believers made them fitting and wholesome. Very little is said about organization. We find no instructions to organize congregations. When the Holy Spirit through the gospel brings a person to faith, he does not create him or her merely as an individual Christian. He at one and the same time creates him or her as a member of Christ's church, his spiritual body. Everywhere where Christians found themselves living in the same locality they, realizing their spiritual fellowship, began to exercise it. Thus the local congregation was invariably the primary grouping.

It is likewise the Holy Spirit who through the same bond of a common faith draws Christians together in Jesus' name in other groupings, draws Christian congregations together in larger groupings such as a synod so that they may share their mutual gifts and gain strength for certain phases of the Lord's great commission, such as the training of pastors and teachers, the establishment and maintenance of mission fields, the exercise of Christian charity, the preservation of unity in doctrine and practice.

In the apostolic church the Christians in the various local congregations indeed knew themselves to be a gathering of believers, the church of God present at a specific locality. But they knew equally well that the same unity with Christ and with each other existed between them and the Christians in Jerusalem, in Achaia, throughout Asia, Samaria and in the house of Aquila and Priscilla. The churches of Galatia had a common problem and Paul addressed them with a single epistle. Paul groups the churches of Macedonia together, like

wise those of Achaia. The apostolic collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem was especially to express the spiritual unity of the Jewish and Gentile churches. In connection with this collection Paul writes (2 Cor 9:2): “For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give.” Peter addressed his first epistle to the Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor. They had common problems and were engaged in joint endeavors. When Timothy’s name occurs for the first time, he is mentioned in connection with the congregations of Derbe and Lystra (Ac 16:1). But immediately we are told that he was well spoken of also by the brethren in Iconium. Timothy had been doing gospel work for at least two, more likely three, congregation. When Paul sent a man from Macedonia together with Titus to help the Corinthians finish their collection for the needy saints at Jerusalem, he described him in the following way:” We are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help” (2 Cor 8:18,19). This gives us a glimpse of the cooperation practiced between the congregations at Macedonia. When Judaizers from Jerusalem came down to the church in Antioch of Syria and troubled the Christians with their error, the latter sent a delegation to the church in Jerusalem to study the problem jointly with them. The problem concerned them both, so they acted together.

The church at Corinth acted rather self-sufficiently, with little regard for other churches. But the Apostle Paul took them sharply to task for it. Paul’s sharpest rebuke is given in 1 Corinthians 14:36: “Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” There were indeed cooperative efforts in the work of the gospel among the congregations of the apostolic church; but again no binding regulations were laid down for carrying them out.

In essence the various groups in Jesus’ name for the proclamation of his gospel all lie on the same plane. They are all gatherings of believers in one and the same sense, namely in the sense that on the basis of the marks of the church we apprehend the presence of the *una sancta* in each such grouping of people. This enables us to acknowledge them as gatherings of believers possessing the ministry of the keys with the right of exercising this ministry in accordance with the considerations of love and order. In saying this, however, we need to distinguish between the possession of a right and the God-pleasing exercise of that right.

As the Holy Spirit leads Christians in their faith, nourished by the Word, to group themselves together in Jesus’ name he always constrains them to do so in an orderly manner and in the spirit of love. St. Paul earnestly reminded the church at Corinth: “God is not a God of disorder but of peace....Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor 14:33, 40). He also admonished (1 Cor 16:14):” Do everything in love.”

The Holy Spirit never leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus’ name for a competitive purpose so as to duplicate, hinder or disturb the scope of the ministry of the keys which is already adequately and effectively provided. for by a previously established grouping of Christians. Every additional secondary grouping of Christians in Jesus’ name that is effected by the Holy Spirit will always be for the purpose of assisting the primary grouping in exercising certain phases of the keys more fully or more efficiently in keeping with the great commission of the Lord.

Thus Christian congregations will group themselves together to form a synod, not to duplicate the administration of the means of grace which they as individual congregations are carrying out at their respective

locality, but to supplement it by undertaking jointly certain phases of the Lord's great commission which they find it very difficult to carry out or to carry out adequately and effectively as individual congregations. Such phases are the thorough training of public servants of the word, nation-wide and world-wide mission programs, the publication of Christian books and literature, the supervision of Christian doctrine and practice throughout all the congregations confessionally united.

Congregations furthermore join together to form a synod for the purpose of offering strengthening of faith through Word and sacrament which because of special circumstances may not be adequately offered or well offered through the already existing primary groupings of believers, e.g., ministry to the handicapped in sight and hearing, the retarded, the institutionalized, ministry to those serving in the Armed Forces, ministry to students at educational institutions away from home. For some of these ministries congregations or specially concerned members, or a combination of both, frequently form other secondary groupings on a regional basis, e.g., Lutheran high school associations, child and family service associations, associations for metropolitan institutional mission work.

The more fully every secondary grouping of Christians in Jesus' name remains conscious of its essential nature as a gathering of believers, as a church, the more keenly will it feel the responsibility of functioning in accordance with love and order. It will carefully restrict itself to those phases of the ministry of the keys for which it has come into existence. It will be concerned that it will not be competing with the ministry of the local congregation or in any way hindering or disturbing it. Secondary groupings will keep keenly mindful of the purpose for which they were formed, that of either supplementing the ministry of the local congregations or of assisting them in certain aspects of their ministry.

It is vital to bear in mind that it is solely because of our God-given Christian faith that we possess the full power of the keys both individually and collectively even in our local congregation. But we do not cease having this full possession of the keys when as congregations or as specially concerned individual members we are gathered together in a secondary grouping in Jesus' name. Also in such secondary groupings it is solely because of our God-given Christian faith that we possess the full power of the keys both individually and collectively. Yet we need to distinguish between the possession and the God-pleasing exercise of the power of the keys. A God-pleasing exercise of the keys must always be in accordance with the considerations of love and good order. This will mean that in a secondary grouping of believers in Jesus' name the public exercise of the keys will need to be restricted to the specific functions of the Christian ministry for which it was formed.

These truths concerning the church the WELS, that is, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, has earnestly sought to reflect in its practice. The WELS lays great emphasis upon the local congregation as the primary grouping of believers in Jesus' name in its midst. Here the WELS sees the basic ministry of Word and sacrament being carried out. The WELS is intent upon having both the members and the pastor, or pastors, of each local congregation think of it as a gathering of believers. If patient, forbearing and solicitous admonitory love no longer makes this possible concerning individuals, this will be an indication to both pastor and members that manifest impenitence and unbelief is involved and that excommunication as a final act of loving testimony is called for; or that in the case of persistence in error termination of fellowship as the ultimate testimony of love is in place. Christians constantly thinking of their congregation as a gathering of believers will be reminded that they too are really members only inasmuch as they stand in Christian faith. Thus they will be

incited to make diligent use of the means of grace by which alone they can be sustained in faith as well as gain strength and zeal for their mission of glorifying their God and Savior jointly and publicly and of sharing the gospel richly with others.

At the same time the WELS is earnest about its confession of Article 10 of the *Formula of Concord*. The WELS accords to the congregation of God at every place the full right and power to institute all the ceremonies, regulations, arrangements and procedures, neither commanded nor forbidden by God, which it deems useful and beneficial in carrying out its administration of the means of grace and its programs of worship and Christian instruction. The WELS as a synod does not presume to prescribe them. This does not discourage local congregations from noting what fellow congregations of their synod consider useful and wholesome in all these matters.

The WELS is equally intent that at the members of our congregations likewise see themselves as a gathering of believers in their secondary grouping as a synod. As long as they are aware that also as a synod they are a gathering of believers in Jesus' name receive the blessings of the gospel and to share them with others they will be very intent about doing their synodical work as a church in accordance with love and good order. They realize that also in this secondary grouping they by virtue of their God-given faith possess the full power of the keys, individually and collectively. But to exercise this power of the keys in a God-pleasing manner grouped as a synod they will responsibly restrict it to those phases of the church's ministry for which they have formed a synod. In the WELS we try to keep in mind that our synodical work is not something extra, something less essential. It is all a vital part of the great commission already entrusted to us by virtue of our God-given Christian faith, work that we have, however, decided to do together with many congregations.

In its work program the WELS always has its congregations and future congregations as the primary grouping of believers in Jesus' name in mind. The WELS worker-training program carried out through its three preparatory schools, its two colleges and its theological seminary is focused upon the thorough training of public servants of the Word, parish pastors and Christian day schoolteachers. The four-year theological course of its Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, including the vicarship year, focuses on training young men for the parish pastorate. That is the basic training also for those who may later be called into the specialized ministries of administration and professorships. For these ministries specialized training may later be provided according to need. Every seminary graduate as a candidate for the holy ministry obligates himself to accept as his first permanent assignment one to a congregational ministry. With its home mission program the WELS purposes to found Christian congregations at ever new places throughout our nation and there to establish the public ministry of the gospel with the special thought of winning the unchurched and then assisting such congregations until they grow strong enough to carry out the ministration of the means of grace by themselves at their specific locality. The WELS's far-flung world mission program seeks to share the precious gospel of Christ with those who have not yet come to enjoy its eternal blessings. But also in this program the WELS envisions the Holy Spirit gathering more and more Christians around Word and sacrament in local congregations.

In training young men and women as Christian day school teachers the WELS seeks to assist its local congregations in a thorough training of the youth through the unified Christian education of a Christian day school.

We find it strange that in hearing that the WELS considers itself to be a gathering of believers, a church with the full possession of the ministry of the keys, many have imagined that it thereby claims to be a super church exercising authority over its local congregations. From all that has been said it should have become evident that nothing can be farther from the truth. The misunderstanding must have arisen from having missed the truth that in the exercise of its keys the WELS in love and good order restricts itself to those phases of the ministry of the church for which it was formed as a secondary grouping. But since as a secondary grouping the WELS is nevertheless a gathering of believers in Jesus' name, it, according to the 10th article of the *Formula of Concord*, as the congregation of God likewise has the right and the power to institute all the regulations, procedures and arrangements, neither commanded nor forbidden by God, which it deems necessary and wholesome in carrying out its specific phases of Christ's ministry.

The right use of Word and sacrament are the true marks of the church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom he would have us express the fellowship that we have in the communion of saints.

While it is through the gospel message in Word and sacrament that we are brought to faith and kept in faith, this gospel message is closely bound up with God's entire inspired and inerrant Word. All of it, also the law, serves this message and the purpose for which it is given to us. Thus the pure marks of the church, the *notae purae* which are the basis for confessional fellowship, include all of God's inspired and inerrant Word.

In principle a Christian confession of faith is always a confession to the entire Word of God. But in this life such a confession nevertheless is still marked by many imperfections, both in the grasp and understanding of scriptural truth and in the matter of turning these truths to full account in Christian life. We are all weak in one way or another. Thus our Lord would have us pay our full debt of love to weakness as it manifests itself in the church, to pay this debt through patient admonition and correction. Yet the Lord admonishes us likewise out of love to withdraw our confessional fellowship from those who persistently teach, spread and condone error and demand equal recognition for such error (Ro 16:17,18; 2 Jn 9-11).

We rejoice, however, in the fact that God in his grace and mercy can and does awaken, sustain and preserve believers also in the midst of erring Christian congregations and church bodies (1 Kgs 19:18). But we remember that God does so not through the errors that are taught and condoned there, but only through the true gospel message that is still heard in erring churches. This incites us to proclaim the pure Word of God with great zeal and faithfulness, also with meekness and love at every God-given opportunity, in order that our testimony may perchance be heard by those who are still God's children in erring churches and they be helped in overcoming the errors with which they are surrounded.

The ministry of the church

In setting forth the scriptural truths of the church we have already said a great deal also about its ministry. One simply cannot speak about the church without touching likewise upon its ministry. What still needs to be pointed out in addition about the church's ministry as confessed in the WELS and reflected in its practice can therefore be fairly brief. The time allotted for this presentation demands this.

Christ instituted one office in his church, the ministry of the gospel. It is the task of proclaiming the gospel in Word and sacrament. This office or service, the ministry of the keys, has been given to the church, i.e., to the believers individually and collectively (Mt 18:18; 1 Pe 2:9).

The risen Savior told his disciples: “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things” (Lk 24:46-48). The Savior before his ascension told his disciples (Mt 28:19,20): “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, and surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This is the whole duty of the church unto the end of time toward all people. It embraces all of God’s Word, the whole counsel of God for the salvation of sinners. In proclaiming any part of the inspired and inerrant Scripture the church is always to keep it in close relation to the central message of our pardon and salvation through Christ. Only in this way will all its testimony remain a part of the ministry of the gospel, the one task assigned to the church.

We speak of this one office or service of the church when we confess in Augustana V “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted” (Con. Trigl. p 45).

The purpose of this ministry is the edification of the church, by winning more and more sinners for Christ and by building up those in their Christian faith and life who already are members of the church.

When Jesus first told his disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations in his name, the number of believers was still exceedingly small. Through their preaching the Holy Spirit brought many sinners to faith in Christ as their Savior. Thus the church of believers was built up from without. This purpose of the church’s ministry of the gospel still calls for the full attention of all of Christ’s believers. By leading sanctified lives before the unregenerate world Christians are to commend the gospel which they individually and publicly proclaim to them. Jesus says: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). Note that the purpose for which people are to see our good works is not that they may be induced to pursue outward decency, but that they, too, may be led to praise and glorify our Father. This they can only do after having been brought to faith themselves. The church’s proclamation of the gospel purposes to convert the unregenerate, not merely to reform them outwardly.

From the beginning of the New Testament church there have been those specially appointed to discharge publicly, i.e., in behalf of a group of Christians, the duties of this one ministry. We hear, for example, in Acts 13:1-3 that in the church of Antioch, while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting “the Holy Spirit said ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed they placed their hands on them and sent them off,” namely, to do mission work in their name among the Gentiles.

This public ministry is not generically different from that of the common priesthood of all believers. The functions are the same. But the public ministry constitutes a special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the gospel. Its distinctiveness lies solely in this that the public ministry is administered in the name and with the consent of all the spiritual priests who come into consideration.

All Christians are equal before God, neither superior nor inferior to one another, and all are equally entrusted with the same ministry of the gospel (1 Pe 2:9). Hence, no one may assume the functions of the public

ministry except through a legitimate call (Ac 14). The authority to call (*ius vocandi*) is implied in the authority to administer the gospel (*ius ministrandi evangelii*) given to the church (Art. Smalc. 522:6 7-69, Con. Trigl.)

Luther says:

...you should put the a Christian into two places. First, if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so. This is what Stephen did, Acts 6-7, even though he had not been ordered into any office by the apostles. Yet he still preached and did great signs among the people. Again, Philip the deacon and Stephen's comrade, Acts 8:5, did the same thing even though the office of preaching was not commanded to him either

Second, if heir at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself Instead he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by command of the others (*Luther's Works*, Vol 39, p 310).

It would be unscriptural, however, to trace the public ministry, as did Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling (d. 1853), to mere expediency. He contended that it is the church which devised the public ministry from the inner necessity that all believers having the same power of the keys could not all exercise this power at the same time.

It is our divine Lord himself who, before the New Testament church was ever called into existence, took note of its future need and prophesied that he would give his New Testament church shepherds and teachers (Jr 3:15). Christ himself called the apostles into the public ministry. Those mediatly called to the public ministry of the apostolic church are coordinated with the apostles as colleagues in office. These public ministers are spoken of as having been called and appointed by God (Ac 20:28;1 Cor 12:28).

The various forms of the public ministry are spoken of as gifts of the ascended and victorious Savior, as part of the treasure of salvation which our Redeemer has won with his redemptive work and which he now showers upon his church for its edification to eternal life (Eph 4:7-16).

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Christians are not equally qualified to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. It is the Lord who sets forth the needed qualifications of those who are to perform publicly the functions of the ministry (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tt 1:5-11). Yet these qualifications are all part of the moral law of God, binding for all people. They do not constitute a special standard of conduct for the public ministry. Though required of it, they are not like the ceremonial requirements for the Old Testament priesthood. Even aptness to teach is a moral requirement for anyone who aspires to teach something in the name of others. God gives to the church those who are qualified for the various functions of the work required (Eph 4:7-1 6; Ro 1 2:6-8;1 Cor 1 2:4-1 1,28, 31). These gifts should be gratefully received and developed by the church (1 Cor 1 2:3 1; 1 Th 5:1 9,20; 1 Tim 4:1 4; 2 Tm 1:6-9).

There is, however, no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry. Here again it must be said that the New Testament church has no binding legal regulations and prescriptions from God beyond that which is embedded in the moral law, God's immutable holy will for all people for this earthly life. Also the apostolic injunction that the woman is not to exercise authority over the man was ordained at creation as a part of the immutable holy will of God for this earthly life. This excludes a woman from those forms of the public ministry in which it would be exercising authority over men. The one public ministry of the gospel may assume various forms as circumstances demand. These forms need not embrace all the functions of the public ministry. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to his New Testament church. Through the Word the Holy Spirit guides the believers in their common faith to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation and need.

Various forms and functions of the public ministry are mentioned in the New Testament. In Ephesians 4:11 we are told that our victorious and exalted Savior "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers." In Corinthians 12:28 we hear: "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." This enumeration is in some respects similar, but by no means identical.

A third enumeration in Romans 12:6-8 speaks more of various functions of the public ministry than of any specific form in which it was established, saying: "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is service, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully." In Titus 1:5 we are told how Titus as a sort of mission counselor was instructed by the Apostle Paul to appoint elders in every town where congregations had previously been gathered through Paul's missionary work. Subsequently, in verse 7, such an elder is referred to as a bishop or overseer. Similarly we hear that Paul and Barnabas had arranged for the appointment of elders, seemingly through congregational vote, in the churches gathered through their missionary work (Ac 14:23). We have no details concerning the various offices mentioned and enumerated which would enable us to re-establish them precisely in the same form today. Moreover, we have no word of institution directing us to do so.

Many more New Testament passages, however, point out the various functions of the public ministry. The Savior bids Peter to feed Christ's lambs as well as his sheep (Jn 21:15-17). In Acts 20:28 the elders of the church of Ephesus are said to have been made overseers of the flock by the Holy Spirit to be shepherds of God's church. In 1 Timothy 5:22; 4:11 and 6:2 we are told of elders teaching; 3:5 and 5:7 speak of them as taking care of the church of God. In the first epistle to Timothy (4:13) he is bidden to devote himself to the public reading of Scripture and to preaching and teaching. In Paul's second epistle to him (2:2) Timothy, who at this time was a sort of superintendent for the churches in Ephesus and its vicinity, is charged to entrust the instruction which he had received from Paul in the presence of many witnesses to reliable men who would likewise be qualified to teach others.

In spite of the great variety in the external forms of the ministerial work the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the gospel - not only those enumerated and mentioned in the

New Testament - but also those developed in our day, are all gifts of the exalted Christ which the church receives gratefully. With due regard to love and order the church employs them under the guidance of God's Word and Spirit for the upbuilding of the spiritual body of Christ. They are all comprehended under the general commission to preach the gospel given to all believers.

These scriptural truths concerning the ministry of the church are confessed in the WELS and reflected in its practice. In the establishment of any form of the public ministry careful attention is at all times given to the scriptural injunction that everything is to be done in an orderly manner and in the spirit of love. Whether a local congregation or a synod, a primary or a secondary gathering of believers, is calling a fellow believer into the public ministry of the church, the call which is extended to him will invariably indicate the full scope of the ministerial tasks which he is being asked to carry out in their name, as well as his relation to other offices of the public ministry.