

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Biblical Principles of Church & Ministry

Which Apply to Ecclesiastical Polity

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[Southern Pastoral Conference of the Southeastern Wisconsin District,
Hope Ev. Lutheran Church, Twin Lakes, WI,
November 14, 1995]

By inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Saint Paul writes that “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (Ep 5:23). The apostle elaborates in his epistle to the Colossians: “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (1:13-20).

No Bible-believing Christian can deny that Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, is the head of his church on earth as well as in heaven. Even all the wicked, the idolaters and blasphemers, will one day acknowledge the authority and kingship of Jesus: “[Christ Jesus], who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Php 2:5-12).

Jesus owns his church, for he created all things visible and invisible, physical and spiritual. When mankind fell into sin and brought condemnation and death into the universe, Jesus entered his own creation, took on the human nature in addition to the divine nature (of which he never divested himself), “and became fully human,”¹ and purchased the salvation of all mankind “not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and with his innocent suffering and death.” Why did he redeem us “from sin, from death and from the power of the devil”? Dr. Luther correctly explained: “All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.”²

St. Paul writes about the relationship of Jesus to all human authorities in Colossians 2:9-10: “For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.” In 1 Corinthians the apostle acknowledges that there is a divinely established hierarchy of authoritative relationships: “Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (11:3). Note well the hierarchy of relationships that God established, not only between men and women, but also between the people of Christ’s church and their God-given leaders: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over

¹ As we confess using the words of the Nicene Creed, found in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 18.

² Unless otherwise specified, all quotations in this paper from Dr. Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* are from the 1979 enchiridion of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, as found in the second edition edited by David Kuske (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1984), et al.

you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (He 13:17). The assertion that Jesus Christ has established authority in his church on earth ought not to be considered foreign to the people of God. Paul asserts the need for orderly relationships in God’s church when he tells the Corinthians: “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1Co 14:40). After all, “God is not a God of disorder but of peace” (1Co 14:33). Orderliness is part of God’s nature and immutable holy will!

Authority exists in any hierarchy of relationships among living beings. If there is more than one hen in a hen house, the hens will peck at each other until a “pecking order” is established. Human beings use hens as long as they produce eggs; afterwards men eat the hens. Male walrus have bloody fights to determine which is to be the beach-master. Eskimos kill the walrus and use them for meat, fur, and blubber. Male deer square off to determine which will be the dominant buck with sole authority to breed with the does in the group. Human beings manage, hunt, and eat the deer. All this is God’s will, fulfilling Genesis 1:26-30: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground -- everything that has the breath of life in it -- I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so.” Again, note that God has established a hierarchy of relationships among his creatures: plants under animals, under mankind, under God. This is his gracious good will.

When it comes to establishing hierarchical relationships, that which we easily observe in the animal kingdom is no less true among human beings. In the Fourth Commandment we are told that it is God’s will that mankind honor the authority which God has given all parents over their children. God has established parents as authorities in the home. God also established rulers and various administrators and law enforcement agencies as authorities in the government. St. Paul makes this very clear in Romans: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience” (13:1-5).

God has established authorities in this world to bless mankind in general, all of whom are subordinate to Jesus’ ultimate authority which he exercises especially for the benefit of his church: “That power is like the working of [God’s] mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church” (Ep 1:19-22). God has established authority and called certain humans to be his representatives, to exercise authority in every sphere of life also in factories, offices, schools (yes, even public schools), in the military, the church, and in every sphere of life. Where there is no established authority, there is only the reign of chaos. Yes, God has established authority also in the church, and has called sinful human beings to positions of authority in Christ’s church on earth.

Unfortunately, since Adam’s fall, the exercise of human authority has been plagued by sin. God himself told Eve that, because of the advent of sin, Adam would sometimes abuse his God-given authority: “Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (Gn 3:16). Sinful man’s perception of all authority has also been plagued by sin, including God’s own authority. Resentment of authority will be the status quo among all

who are infected with the Old Adam until the end of time, for only in paradise will we be free of our sinful nature, free of sinners in positions of authority over us, free of the fear of being abused by others in authority over us, free of being in positions of authority ourselves, and able to fully appreciate the orderly and authoritative rule of Christ. In heaven we will have no fear of kings such as Saul (cf. 1Sm 12), or Solomon and Rehoboam (cf. 1Kg 12:1-19). The words of the victorious saints in heaven express the attitude all Christians will one day have toward God's authority when we are perfectly renewed in the image of our creator: "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (Rv 15:3-4). The saints and angels in heaven love the authoritative rule of the Lamb, "Because he is Lord of lords and King of kings -- and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers" (Rv 17:14).

As with all God-given authority, authority in the church is instituted by God in order to bless us, not to curse us. Yet it seems that the church is constantly cursed by struggles over authority among Christians, between congregations and denominations, pastors and teachers, laity and clergy, boards and committees, councils and consistories, bishops and clergy, elders and deacons, ad nauseam. This is nothing new. Jesus' own apostles were not above such struggles, even while in the visible, physical presence of the Savior himself (cf. Mt 20:20-27; Mk 10:35-44; Lk 22:24-29). I believe that the constant "turf wars," "power games," and "politics" which so plague the visible church on earth (and, yes, occasionally even our own Wisconsin Synod and its constituent congregations, church workers, organizations and laity) were the impetus for the theme committee of this conference to assign this paper. I also believe that, in order to clearly and correctly grasp what God wills and what Scripture teaches about authority in the church and how these principles apply in our church polity, one must first:

- 1. Properly understand what a Christian is;**
- 2. Properly understand what the church is;**
- 3. Properly understand what the mission of the church is; and**
- 4. Properly understand the differences between authority in the church and authority in the world.**

I realize that the doctrine of the church and its ministry has been greatly debated in our circles in recent years. May we ever heed the admonition of St. Paul: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1Co 1:10). In order to help us achieve a clear and correct grasp of what God's will is and what Scripture teaches about authority in the church and how these principles apply to ecclesiastical polity, let us examine the biblical concept of authority in the church and how it rightly finds expression and application in the various aspects of Christ's church and its ministry.

In order to understand the biblical concept of authority in the church, we need to understand just exactly what the church is; and in order to understand what the church is, we first need to understand exactly what a Christian is. A Christian is a believer, i.e., one who trusts in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and the Son of man, who lived and died to atone for our sins, who rose back to life from the dead, ascended into heaven, and who will come to take all who trust in him to spend eternity with him in heaven. By saying that a believer is someone who believes the Gospel, we are not saying that one must merely know the historical facts of salvation in order to be a believer, as St. James says: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that -- and shudder" (Ja 2:19). Melancthon writes in the Apology: "For to believe the Gospel is not that general faith which devils also have [is not only to believe the history of the Gospel], but in the proper sense it is to believe that the remission of sins has been granted for Christ's sake. For this is revealed in the Gospel" (Ap XII. (V.) 45).³ Jesus speaks of Christians around the world when he says in John's gospel: "I have other sheep that

³ *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 263.

are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (10:16). A Christian is a lamb of the Savior’s flock, one who listens to the voice of the Good Shepherd. A Christian is one who has been born again of the Holy Spirit through the washing with water and the word, as Jesus told Nicodemus: “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (Jn 3:5-6).

St. Paul tells us what a Christian is in his epistle to Titus: “[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (3:5-7). A Christian has been saved purely by the mercy of God. A Christian has been born again by holy baptism. A Christian has received a generous portion of the Holy Spirit through the Savior, Jesus Christ. A Christian has been declared “not guilty” of sin simply because of God’s undeserved saving love for sinners. A Christian is an heir of the eternal kingdom of God, and as such has the blessed assurance of eternal life in heaven.

A Christian is free from bondage to the legal requirements of the Mosaic Law. Paul explains the purpose of the Law of Moses and what this freedom means in his epistle to the Christians in Galatia: “Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to [better: “until”] Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:23-29). And yet a Christian is still bound by God’s immutable law of love: Love God, and love your neighbor (cf. Mt 22:36-40; Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:27). Jesus is the Christian’s only lord and master: “For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ’s slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1Co 7:22-23). Yet St. Paul also told the Corinthians later in that same letter: “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (10:24). Every Christian is duty-bound to serve God and to serve his fellow man, in spite of the fact that he has been freed by Christ. This seems paradoxical.

Keep in mind, then, this tension which exists in each Christian, the paradox clearly spelled out by Martin Luther: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁴ Christ fulfilled the Law for us and has freed us from servitude to the Law by his active and passive obedience. Paul explains this freedom beautifully in 1 Corinthians: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (9:19-23). The apostle understood that, as a Christian, he was not bound by the Law of Moses. He knew that he was a free lord of all, subject to none. Nevertheless, out of love for his fellow man and in the interest of winning souls for eternity, Paul was willing to submit himself to the Law of Moses and forgo the exercise of his prerogatives as a free Christian man when reaching out to the Jews. He willingly lived as a servant to all, subject to all, even when trying to evangelize Jews. Paul was obeying the law of love.

Jesus is our great High Priest: “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people . . . Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (He 2:17-3:1). Jesus is also our brother: “The one who makes men holy, and those who are made holy, are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them

⁴ *Luther’s Works*, American Ed., Vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), p. 344.

brothers” (He 2:11). Since Jesus is a priest and through faith we are his brothers, it follows that every Christian is also a priest of God. St. Peter agrees: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt 2:9).

Every Christian is a member of the spiritual priesthood of Christ, who “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father” (Rv 1:6) and as such possesses all things, including all the priestly prerogatives, as St. Paul writes: “So then, no more boasting about men! All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future -- all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1Co 3:21-23). And what are those priestly prerogatives which all priests possess by virtue of their priesthood? Johannes Brenz lists them for us:

But these are priestly offices: to teach or to proclaim the Word of God as often as he would be required, so that a true Christian would be born, when a house-father has sinned against his [household], a schoolmaster against his pupils, a master against his servant and anyone against the one who errs.

Secondly, to baptize, which everyone needs in common, to show the women that the children (when they name it) are to be baptized quickly.

Thirdly, to institute or administer [the] sacrament. Now since the Word of God institutes and makes the sacrament (1 Timothy 4:5: “It is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer,” etc.), and since the Word of God, and also the prayer of any believing Christian, is commanded and needed, [then] it also follows that any Christian may institute and administer the sacrament (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24: “Do this in remembrance of me,” etc.). For to whom this word is said: “Take and eat,” to that same one is also said: “Do that which is instituted, give thanks, and eat,” as a meal which Christ has established.

Fourthly, to pray for one another. For this function is common, to proclaim the prayer “Our Father,” etc.

Fifthly, to sacrifice, that is to kill the old Adam (Romans 12:1: “I urge you, that you offer your body as a sacrifice...”), but such is the duty of true believers.⁵

Brenz correctly identifies basic functions common to all priests: proclaiming the word of God, administering sacraments, interceding with God on behalf of others, and offering sacrifice. He also explains how every Christian is to carry out these functions.

You will find Brenz in perfect agreement with Luther in these matters.⁶ And just as Luther was challenged for so elevating the laity that many thought he was in fact tearing down the clergy, so also was Brenz taken to task by the papists. The objections usually raised were (and still are), “What is the difference between the clergy and the laity if all are priests? What prevents every Christian from administering sacraments whenever the mood suits him? How can all preach and otherwise function as priests simultaneously? What if a priest is untrained or unable to fulfil his priesthood?” Brenz anticipates these objections as he goes on to explain:

Now although preaching the word of God and instituting or administering the sacrament is the duty of every single Christian, and also every single believer has full right and authority to do it -- yet what is a right in common, no one should make his own property -- therefore no one in the

⁵ My own translation of Johannes Brenz’ *Underrichtung der Zwispaltigen Artikel Christenlichs Glaubens*, published by Martin Brecht, Gerhard Schafer and Frieda Wolf, Johannes Brenz Frühschriften, Teil 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1970), pp. 68-69.

⁶ To demonstrate the agreement of Brenz and Luther goes well beyond the scope of this paper. However, it was this author’s privilege to demonstrate exactly this in an unpublished paper for a summer quarter church history course (CH456) at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary dated August 11, 1995, entitled *An Examination of Johannes Brenz’ Doctrine of The Ministry of the Keys and Confession as he taught in his Underrichtung der Zwispaltigen Artikel Christenlichs Glaubens*.

common congregation is born to these offices, to preach, to institute and administer the sacrament, to undertake by a special power to lead and to use. Therefore it is fitting for a Christian congregation, group or gathering to handle the calling of these offices -- one, two, three or however many are necessary -- in order that there might be no disorderliness in the congregation (1 Corinthians 14:40). And such chosen persons in the scriptures are called “bishops” [episkopi] or “presbyters” [bresbyteri]. Now a bishop is called in German an “overseer” [uffseher] or a “watchman” [wechter] and is not a word of dignity, but of office [amptz] or calling; thus it is ordered by the congregation. Also the presbyter is called in Latin senator, in German rhatzher. Just as at no time does a real citizen [burger] have the power to be a councilman [rhatzher] who has not been born one, taking a common right and making it his own property, but must wait until, in the common group, he is called to such an office [ambt], so also although an individual Christian in himself has the power of priestly offices, he still must await the call of the congregation in order to execute such offices.⁷

Brenz’ point is that, even though all Christians are priests of God and have the right to function as such, none should do so publicly (i.e., in the name of and on behalf of other Christians) unless he is called to that office and charged with that function by the group of Christians in whose name he is to execute such priestly functions. Brenz actually states one of his presuppositions: “What is a right in common, no one should make his own property.” This is indeed an excellent safeguard. After all, as an American citizen I own our national parks, together with all the other citizens of this fair land. But this ownership does not entitle me to build my vacation home on the rim of the Grand Canyon. I may only do this if the body of American citizens grants me that right. All Christians are priests and have the power to preach and to baptize, but not all Christians are called to function as preachers and baptizers. A Christian may only assume the role of preacher or baptizer if the congregation of believers (his fellow priests) calls him to do so in their stead. This is also stated clearly in the Augsburg Confession: “No one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called [ohne ordentlichen Beruf, nisi rite vocatus]” (AC XIV).⁸

In order that we might properly grasp the Bible’s doctrine of the church, we must always remember what a Christian is, keeping in mind the distinction between the invisible (innerliche) and the visible (eusserliche) church,⁹ and how individual Christians are related to each. The church is nothing more or less than the communion of saints, the fellowship of all who have by faith been sanctified as God’s people. August Pieper explains Luther’s entire doctrine of the church and its ministry in a nutshell when he writes:

The doctrine of the Church and Ministry is not an isolated doctrine, alongside of, and separated from, the doctrine of the Christian and his freedom and servitude, but rather is this doctrine itself; only now it is applied no longer to a single Christian alone, but to more Christians at one place or to all Christians in the world as one communion. Whatever is the nature of one Christian, the same is the nature of every other Christian, the same is also the nature of Christians in smaller or larger groups or of all Christians as one body. Whatever the Church according to her spiritual nature is, she is this by virtue of the spiritual nature of every single one of her members. The difference consists only in the number here an individual, there many . . . Whoever knows what a Christian is, has and does, and how he comes into being, and adds to this the concept of plurality or totality together with everything that is naturally implied in these concepts, he has the doctrine

⁷ Ibid., pp. 69-70.

⁸ Concordia Triglotta, p. 49.

⁹ In his *Underrichtung den Zwispaltigen Artikel Christenlichs Glaubens*, the terms *innerliche* and *eusserliche* are used by Brenz, rather than the terms “visible” and “invisible,” which we are accustomed to use.

of the Church and her office correct and complete. He cannot err in this matter, if only he understands the doctrine of what a Christian is.¹⁰

A Christian is a believer. Therefore, the Christian church is made up of believers. Just as a Christian is a lamb who hears the voice of his Good Shepherd, so “A child of seven years old knows what the Church is, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA 3, XII).¹¹ Whatever a Christian is, the church is the same thing except in the plural. Just as a Christian is justified, holy, righteous, and a child of God through faith in Jesus, so also the church is justified, holy, righteous, and children of God through faith in Jesus. Just as a Christian is a saint, a priest, a prophet, and a spiritual king before God, so the church is the saints, priests, prophets, and spiritual kings before God. Pick whatever adverb, adjective, or noun you please; whatever aptly describes an individual Christian also aptly describes the Christian church in any place, at any time, at any gathering, in any grouping, in any size, and with whatever organizational polity.

The Roman Catholic Church does not deny that the church is made up of believers, but rather teaches that the church is the visible gathering of believers who are united externally to the magisterium of clergy alleged to have the historic episcopate. Rome’s emphasis is on the visible association of believers, the external [eusserliche] church, that which can be comprehended with the eyes and the mind. The Lutheran emphasis is on the invisible fellowship of believers, the internal [innerliche] church, that which can only be comprehended with faith (“I believe in the ... holy Christian Church, the communion of saints...”). The very existence of the church is an article of faith, an article which we regularly confess in the Apostles’ Creed.

What makes a group of Christians a church is not that they unite together physically in a given locale, but that they are united by a common spiritual faith in Christ. St. Luke records Jesus’ words as he explained the essential invisible, internal nature of the church: “Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is within you’” (Lk 17:20-21). Only God can know for certain who belongs to the internal, invisible church, for only he can read hearts: “Then they prayed, ‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen’” (Ac 1:24). Even the prophet Elijah, who was unable to ascertain the presence of the church in his land, had to be told by God: “‘I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (Ro 11:4-5).

That remnant is invisible, and so it must be until Judgment Day when all things invisible to our weak eyes will be made plain. Until that time, the true church of Jesus must remain invisible simply because it is the communion of saints -- of believers -- and no man can see faith. Does this church of Jesus Christ exist only in the abstract, as in some platonic idea, or is it anywhere a present reality?

Fortunately, the communion of saints is very real and is no mere abstraction or platonic idea. Jesus says, “I know those I have chosen” (Jn 13:18). It is for this chosen invisible church that Jesus prays in his high priestly prayer (Jn 17). St. Paul writes in Ephesians 1: “God placed all things under [Jesus’] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (vv.22-23). Paul also speaks of the invisible church as a very real entity in Ephesians 2: “For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (vv. 18-22).

How then can we recognize the true church, since it is invisible and spiritual in nature? After all, God does admonish believers to recognize each other as Christians and to gather together for mutual encouragement: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting

¹⁰ August Pieper, “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” trans. by Harold R. Johne in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 60 #2 [April, 1963], pp. 94-95.

¹¹ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 499.

together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another -- and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (He 10:24-25). God wants us to gather together with other Christians around his word and his work, and all such gatherings are the church! Jesus teaches Christians how to deal with the manifestly impenitent sinner in order to win the sinner back for Christ: “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:17-20). In whatever form you find the church, and in whatever place or number the church may be present, it is to the church that you must eventually appeal your case to convict the impenitent. Perhaps by the witness of the church, i.e., the believers, the impenitent may recognize his sin, repent, and believe the Gospel of unconditional forgiveness which is also proclaimed by that same gathering of believers.

God did not leave us to fumble in the dark, to look in vain for an invisible church which we cannot perceive with our senses in the first place. It is to the visible church that we must go, the church which we can recognize with our senses, trusting that the invisible church is indeed present as God himself has promised. For although the church *stricte dicta* is the invisible gathering of believers known only to God, yet we are to recognize the presence of the church whenever and wherever we see the *notae ecclesiae*, the marks of the church, i.e., God’s word and sacraments. Just as the Holy Spirit makes a person a Christian by means of God’s word and sacraments, so also the Holy Spirit gathers Christians into his church by means of God’s word and sacraments. Wherever people are gathered together around and are making use of God’s word and sacraments, there is the church of Jesus Christ. A Christian is such because of these means of grace; therefore the church is also such because of these same means of grace.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession defines the church as “the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”¹² We can be certain that the church is present (by synecdoche) wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are rightly administered, for God promised through Isaiah: “My word that goes out from my mouth ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). St. Paul was confident of the same thing: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” (Ro 1:16-17).

If several men who happen to be Christians are discussing the recent Packers-Bears game while gathered together around the coffee break table at the factory, this is not the church. Why not? Because they are not gathered together around the marks of the church. If, on the other hand, they change the subject and begin to study God’s word together, then they are church in the proper sense. (Unless united in doctrine they would be a heterodox church, but church nevertheless, for every believer belongs to the holy Christian church.) Some argue that no group is truly church unless they also distribute the sacraments. But neither the scriptures nor our confessions say that the church is present only where the sacraments are distributed! The church is present wherever “the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.”¹³ Those Christian men at the coffee table ARE administering the sacraments correctly, even when not distributing them!¹⁴ (As a pastor I rightly administer the sacrament even when I refuse to commune someone who clings to false doctrine.) It would be highly disorderly for them to start baptizing and distributing Christ’s body and blood, for they have not received any proper, orderly call to do so. Nevertheless, were those men to choose to distribute the

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ In this paper I make a distinction between “administering” and “distributing” the sacraments, two words which we often use interchangeably but which are not necessarily synonymous. Any dictionary will confirm this.

sacraments, they certainly could do so and those sacraments would indeed be valid, for the efficacy of the sacraments is found, not in the person of the ministrant, but in the word of Christ. If any believers would be so disorderly as to distribute the sacraments on their own without a proper call to do so, they would be violating, not the doctrine of the sacraments, but the doctrine of the call; yet the sacraments even thus administered would still be salutary for all who received them in faith, as the Apology states: “Neither are the Sacraments without efficacy for the reason that they are administered by wicked men; yea, we can even be right in using the Sacraments administered by wicked men” (Ap VII.VIII, 3).¹⁵

Once again, the church is present wherever the notae ecclesiae are present. Melancthon continues in the same article of the Apology, where he speaks of the presence of the invisible church wherever the visible signs are found: “The Christian Church ... has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ” (Ap VII.VIII, 5).¹⁶ For it is by these marks that God alone gathers and preserves his church: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16). “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ep 5:25-27). “Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture” (Ps 100:3). “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God -- children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn 1:12-13). “...Who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time” (1Pe 1:5). And so we believe, teach and confess as Luther explained in his definition of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, found in his Small Catechism:

I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.

But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers

Why does God gather Christians together into the church in the first place? What is God’s purpose for his church? What is the mission of the church? These three questions are all exactly the same, and demand the same answer. Recall what Jesus’ own mission was, as he told Nicodemus: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (Jn 3:17). At Zachaeus’ home Jesus also revealed his mission: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk 19:10). The purpose or mission of Christ’s holy church is the same, for Jesus told his church: “Jesus said, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’” (Jn 20:21-23). Just as Jesus was sent by his Father to seek out sinners and to save them by declaring God’s gracious forgiveness of sins, and to pronounce God’s eternal wrath against all who refuse God’s word, so Jesus gathers his church and sends it out into the world with the same mission and message.

It is not the church’s purpose to solve the problems of society, to feed, clothe, or heal men’s bodies, or to provide physical recreation or entertainment. While the church often does such things, these are not essential functions of the church and dare never conflict with the purpose of the church. The early apostolic church had a problem in this area, and by God’s grace they were led to see the light. St. Luke records that the apostles were forced to slight the primary task of the church, the ministry of the word, in order to feed the widows. Now the

¹⁵ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 227.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

distribution of food to the widows of the church was indeed an important job -- a praiseworthy but it became a distraction for the entire church when it conflicted with the primary function of the church. Listen to the inspired account: "In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.' This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (Ac 6:1-7).

The Lord certainly led the apostles and the entire church to see the problem, and he led them to see the solution. Their decision and action to divide the responsibilities were dictated by wisdom from God, love for the one thing needful, a desire for orderliness, and a desire to keep everything in its proper perspective. In order to clearly and correctly grasp what God wills and what Scripture teaches about authority in the church and how these principles apply in our church polity, one must properly understand what the mission of the church is. We must keep in mind the distinction between administration of the Keys of the kingdom of heaven and administration of the various and sundry other duties of Christian love which are incumbent upon the church in our world today; otherwise, we are in danger of losing the Gospel itself and becoming little more than a welfare relief society. Praise God that the apostolic church understood that!

It is the church's job to administer the Keys of the kingdom of God, as Jesus promised that he would give them to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19). Jesus did not at this moment give Peter the Keys, but spoke in the future tense to promise that someday he would give Peter the Keys. Later Jesus gave his Keys to his entire church (i.e., to every believer, individually and collectively) and commanded the church to administer them: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:15-20).

This is the purpose, the function of the church, to administer the Keys to the kingdom of heaven. The Keys are the Law and the Gospel. (Sometimes it is said that the Keys are the Gospel in the word and sacraments. That is not quite accurate, for the Gospel in word and sacraments is the "loosing key" which opens the doors of heaven by declaring sins forgiven. The Law is the "binding key" which withholds forgiveness from the impenitent, thereby locking the impenitent out of heaven.)

Jesus gave his Keys to every individual Christian, and every Christian is to use those Keys according to the calling which God has given him. If God has through his church called you to administer the Keys from the pulpit, then do so faithfully. Give hell to every manifestation of the Old Adam sitting in the pews before you. Give heaven to all those believers who sit at your feet. In so doing you are administering both Keys, faithfully fulfilling your divine call.

If God has through his church called you to administer the Keys in front of a classroom or on a baseball diamond or basketball court, then do so faithfully. Give hell to every manifestation of the Old Adam sitting at the desks before you or gathered in your dugout or sitting on your bench. Give heaven to all those believers who are under your charge. In so doing you are administering both Keys, faithfully fulfilling your divine call.

If God has through his church called you to administer the Keys from an office where you sit and write instructional materials and policies to help teach the word of God, then do so faithfully. Divide God's word of truth correctly, so that the words which go forth from your office into the parishes and homes of God's people may bear abundant fruit. In your writings give hell to every manifestation of the Old Adam. Give heaven to all those who will read your writings and believe the promises of God contained therein. In so doing you are administering both Keys, faithfully fulfilling your divine call.

If God has through his church called you to administer the Keys as an overseer and counselor to other pastors and congregations, then do so faithfully. Give hell to every manifestation of the Old Adam sitting in the chairs or around the tables before you. Give heaven to all those believers whom God has given you to counsel. Use God's word to build up your counselees. In so doing you are administering both Keys, faithfully fulfilling your divine call.

If God has called you to be a farmer and your hired hand misuses God's name or steals tools, administer the Keys according to your calling: preach the Law and, if he repents, preach the Gospel. Although we are not accustomed to referring to such a calling as a "divine call," usually limiting our use of that term to refer to ministry in the name of and on behalf of a group of believers, God does indeed call every individual Christian to be a priest and gives every priest all priestly prerogatives, as we demonstrated early in this paper.

Yes, every Christian is commissioned by God to administer the Keys of the kingdom of heaven according to the calling which God has given him. Jesus spoke to every single Christian when he commissioned his church to "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15-16). He was speaking to every individual believer when he commissioned his church to "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 am with you always" (Mt 28:19-20). Jesus opened the mind of each individual disciple and commissioned each one of them as witnesses to the world: "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, '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 24:45-48).

The early Christian church understood that Jesus was calling each one of them, not only collectively as "church," but also individually, to be his witnesses (Acts 1 & 2). They acted as church, i.e., as a group of Christians, when they "joined together constantly in prayer" (Ac 1:14), when they sat at the feet of the apostles to listen to them expound and apply Scripture for them (Ac 1:15-20), when they gathered to meditate on the word, to express their unity, to celebrate the sacrament and to pray (Ac 2:42), and when they extended a call to fill the vacancy in the apostolic ranks occasioned by Judas' defection (Ac 1:21-26). Each of them also acted as individual priests when they received the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, evidenced by the tongues of fire and their ability to speak in tongues (Ac 2:1-4), when they all went out into the streets of Jerusalem and used their spiritual gifts in accordance with their calling to spread God's word to the people of the nations (Ac 2:5-12), and when they sacrificed greatly of themselves and of their own possessions to care for the needy (Ac 2:44-46).

In order to enable his holy church to carry out the commission to disciple the nations, Christ has given his church on earth many gifts. He who gave the church its mission also gave it the tools for fulfilling that mission, namely, the Keys to the kingdom of heaven. He who gave the Keys to the church also gives the spiritual knowledge, strength and motivation to his church in order that the Keys might be used correctly. He who gave the church the task of administering the Keys in an orderly manner also gives the office of the public ministry. He who gave the office of the public ministry also gives the manpower to fill the office wherever and whenever it pleases him. He who gives public ministers to his church also gives them the necessary ability to faithfully carry out the work of administering the Keys as long as it pleases him.

We read in the Augsburg Confession, Art. IV, about the central doctrine of Christianity, justification by faith without the works of the Law. "This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight," Philip Melancthon writes. He continues with the following words, which happen to be in the next Article (V): "That we may obtain

this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel”¹⁷ With these words all Lutherans confess that we believe that God has given the church the function, responsibility, and duty to proclaim the Gospel, in order that people may come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Article V is entitled “Of the Ministry” [Vom Predigtamt; De Ministerio Ecclesiastico]. I say that this title is unfortunate because it does not correctly identify the contents of Article V. This article deals with the mission of the church, i.e., to proclaim God’s word and administer the sacraments so that more people may be brought to faith. This article does not express the Lutheran doctrine that God has instituted the office of the public ministry in the sense of establishing a clerical body or group. Much less does it speak specifically of the office of pastor in our churches. This is proven by the clear words themselves, “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.” Sinners are not brought to faith in Christ through the pastor or through anyone else, but only through the means of grace. Ministers are not a means of grace. Our understanding of this matter is also proven correct by the antithesis condemned in the second paragraph of Article V: “They condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Ghost comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.” The Confession does not here condemn those who reject the clergy, but it condemns those who believe in the immediate operation of the Holy Spirit. This article expresses the doctrine that the Spirit works faith mediately, through word and sacraments. The German title Vom Predigtamt is just fine as long as we don’t mistakenly identify the Predigtamt as the office of pastor. Often in the writings of our German forefathers the term was used in this way, but often it was not. The sloppy use of the term Predigtamt, especially by those who wish to identify it with Pfarramt, has been the butt of many a theological debate (often pointless!) over the past two centuries, especially in this country. Predigtamt properly and simply indicates the function (office) of proclaiming God’s word. The Latin title De Ministerio Ecclesiastico is also unfortunate, for a similar reason. The word ministerio does not mean a group of clergymen, either, although that’s probably the first thought that comes to mind when one hears the word ministerium. Ministerium merely means function, task, or office in that same sense.

That God does call some to administer the Keys “publicly,” in the name of and on behalf of other Christians (so-called “representative ministry”) is clear from Scripture. The church at Syrian Antioch was used by the Holy Spirit to call Barnabas and Saul to go to the Gentiles as missionaries and to proclaim the Gospel in their stead: “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshiping 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. The two of them, sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus” (Ac 13:1-4).

Because Christians are free of the Old Testament ceremonial law, we must always be vigilant not to allow any hint of ceremonial law in the New Testament church. St. Paul makes this clear in Galatians 5:1: “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” The church in apostolic days felt free, and rightly so, to set up whatever forms of public ministry the believers deemed appropriate, and they did just that. The New Testament speaks not only of the apostles (which office was uniquely set up by Jesus) but also of deacons, evangelists, teachers, overseers (bishops), elders, and in one place even mentions pastors (Ep 4:11). These various offices of the public ministry varied in what we might call the scope of their duties, but the essence of their office and calling was the same. They were called to function in the name of and on behalf of other Christians in order that the church might administer the Keys faithfully. The Christian church is absolutely free, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to establish whatever forms of public ministry it deems fit because it is free of ceremonial law!

This is a good place to point out the error of Hoefling of Erlangen, who claimed that the public ministry is not divinely instituted as such, but is merely a necessary human arrangement and merely an expediency for

¹⁷ *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 45.

the sake of orderliness. Hoefling is roundly condemned in the modern dogmatic writings of our church for two reasons.¹⁸ First of all, the public ministry of the Gospel is not merely a human arrangement, but is of divine origin. Secondly, although the specific job description of every public minister of the Gospel is a free matter for the calling group of Christians to decide for themselves, the office of the ministry is not merely a human arrangement. St. Paul reminds the Ephesian elders: “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” (Ac 20:28). The apostle also reminds them that Christ Jesus gave them their public ministers: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Ep 4:11). He tells the Corinthians the same thing: “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” (1Co 12:28). Orderliness is only one reason why God established the public ministry.

Just because God leaves the church free to establish various forms of ministry as it sees fit, let no one suppose that having a public ministry is an adiaphoron! The fact that God has established the public ministry is quite certain: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ep 4:11-13). God gives public ministers of the Gospel to his church in order to build up the church through faithful proclamation of God’s word. Through his apostles Christ commanded that ministers be selected and called into their office through the church, but God nowhere specifies what method must be used. In Acts 6 the seven deacons were “chosen” [v.3] and “presented” [v.6], but we’re not told how. In Acts 13:2 Barnabas and Saul were “set apart.” In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas “appointed” elders for the churches in Galatia.¹⁹ In Acts 15:22 the apostles and elders, together with the congregation at Jerusalem, having met in the first synod convention, decided to “choose” some of their own number to represent the synod in the communication of the recent synodical decisions. In 2 Corinthians 8:19 we read that a man was chosen by the churches of Macedonia to accompany the apostles (and the offering) to Jerusalem. In Titus 1:5 Paul instructed Titus to “appoint” elders in every town.

Exactly what percentage of each minister’s time was spent specifically administering the Keys and how much was spent doing other duties is a matter of interest and speculation. This question is often asked by those who wonder how it can be maintained that, for example, a physical education teacher in our Lutheran schools can be said to be in the office of the public ministry. But all of our teachers, yes, even our PE coaches, are charged by the church with the public administration of the Keys of the kingdom. They are expected to carry out all discipline in a Christian manner, correctly using Law and Gospel. They are expected to teach their students how a Christian handles physical and mental training, pressure, competition, winning, losing, injury, and fatigue. They are expected to bring God’s word into their classes wherever it applies. They are expected to set themselves and their households as fine examples of Christian living so that the students under their care may follow their examples as well as their words. They are expected to serve as examples for the Christian congregation among whom they serve as well. They are expected to represent our Lutheran school as befits ministers of the Gospel. They are expected to make the study of God’s word a top priority in their daily lives, and to teach their students how to keep the word of God in the proper priority in their own lives. Besides, as ministers of the Gospel, even PE coaches will occasionally be asked to lead a Bible study or give a devotion (or even a conference paper). As a synod we recognize these things and not only extend a divine call to our PE coaches but also provide them with training in Scripture and Christian pedagogy.

¹⁸ See Franz Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, pp. 444-449.

¹⁹ Appointed” (χειροτονήσαντες) means “to elect by a show of hands, to elect, or simply to choose.” see John Brug’s recent article “Ordination and Installation in the Scriptures,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 92 #4 [Fall, 1995], p. 266.

After all, it is argued, the seven deacons of Acts 6 were given charge of the distribution of food for the body, not for the soul! How can they be called ministers of the Gospel? Some say that they had word and sacrament duties added to their job descriptions later on because Stephen and Philip are both found doing things that ministers of the Gospel usually do, namely, proclaiming God's word (Ac 6:8ff. and 8:5-7,26ff.) and, in Philip's case, baptizing (Ac 8:38-39). Others say that these two men merely administered the word and baptism of their own volition on the basis of their membership in the universal priesthood. These two deacons, and perhaps the others, may well have been further charged with public duties of the ministry of the Keys by the church at a later date; otherwise, they might be open to the charge of disorderliness by taking these duties upon themselves. It is not uncommon in our circles today for a call to be extended with a more or less detailed job description, concluding with a phrase similar to this: "...and other duties as mutually agreed upon." (Ask any Lutheran elementary school teacher what falls into this category!)

Let's face it, brothers. Even the office of the pastoral ministry is not precisely the same in every place at every time. Some pastors are not expected to make shut-in calls because that responsibility has been given to another pastor. Some pastors are required to publish a monthly newsletter; others are not. At a parish in another state the pastor must mow the grass around the church and school all summer, and the principal must shovel the church and school sidewalks in the winter. Every call to serve in the public ministry is unique in the scope of its duties, but the essence of every call is the same: a group of free Christian priests has called a fellow priest to exercise certain priestly functions in their stead. Such a call is divine because it is from God, communicated to the called person by means of Christ's church on earth.

It is not scripturally defensible to claim that no person is in the public ministry unless he has been called to publicly administer both of the sacraments as well as the word, as some are inclined to believe. When a layman does not assist his pastor in distributing the sacrament, that layman as an individual priest before God IS also thereby correctly administering (not distributing!) the sacrament by not violating the pastor's divine call to distribute the sacrament for the entire congregation. Not all of the called workers in the apostolic church were directly engaged in distributing the word and sacraments, as is clearly deduced from St. Paul's admonition: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1Ti 5:17). Apparently some elders were charged with administrative functions in the affairs of the church rather than word and sacrament functions, but they are also called "elders" and are to be esteemed as "worthy of double honor" if they perform their tasks well. But Paul also holds up preaching and teaching as the greater functions with the little word *μάλιστα* ("especially"). There is no greater service in the church than the ministry of the Keys!

Remember, the essence of Christian ministry is the direct application of the word of God to people's souls. This is what the church is all about. All other duties which the church or any minister might be involved in doing must remain down the list of priorities, for the purpose of the church is to administer the Keys to the kingdom of heaven, not the keys to the supply closet. "The Gospel is the power of God for salvation" (Ro 1:16), not the volleyball or bowling leagues. Such amenities are nice to have in a church, but they do nothing to win souls for Jesus. Only the marks of the church -- the means of grace, the Gospel in word and sacrament -- are the *causa efficiens* for the establishing, extending, and preservation of the church.

Ministers of the Gospel are the *causa instrumentalis* for the expansion and preservation of the church only insofar as they faithfully and correctly administer the means of grace. St. Peter says: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 4:11). St. Paul reminds St. Timothy: "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1 Ti 1:3). In the Old Testament the Lord himself declares: "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.'" Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,' declares the LORD. 'They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least,' declares the LORD" (Jr 23:31-32).

Finally, in order to clearly and correctly grasp what God wills and what Scripture teaches about authority in the church and how these principles apply in our church polity, one must first understand the differences between authority in the church and authority in the world, the ministerial and magisterial functions of those who have been placed into positions of authority in the church, and believe that God desires only to bless us through the authorities which he has established in the church. In order to bless his people, God has established authority in every sphere of life, including the church. St. Paul says: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Ro 13:1-2).

Although it’s true that the apostle is speaking specifically about the government, these words do give excellent expression to the principle that God has established human authorities in this world as well, and that his divinely called leaders must be obeyed. After all, their authority is God-ordained. The writer to the Hebrews speaks specifically about authorities in the church: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (He 13:17). St. Paul certainly held a high opinion of the authoritative role of the Gospel ministry: “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God” (1Co 4:1). “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us” (2Co 5:18-20). The call to Gospel ministry is a bestowal of divine authority upon a human being, whom Christ calls to be his ambassador.

Christ himself recognized the authority of the teachers of God’s word; however, Jesus also pointed out the limits of their authority and how they were abusing their authority: “Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: ‘The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi.’ But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers” (Mt 23:1-8). Even the religious leaders at the temple in Jesus’ day “sat in Moses’ seat,” not by virtue of the Levitical priesthood, nor by virtue of ordination, historic continuity or dignity of office. The rabbis sat in Moses’ seat by virtue of their function of teaching God’s word to God’s people -- by virtue of what they were charged to do, not who they happened to be. The problem with the scribes and Pharisees is that they went way beyond God’s word by adding countless laws to God’s Law, while they themselves were hypocrites. Their religion had degenerated into vain worship, because “Their teachings are but rules taught by men” (Mt 15:9). The apostles Peter and John were very clear about whose teachings were to be followed by God’s people: “We must obey God rather than men!” (Ac 5:29).

All authorities in the church, divinely established though they are, must take a back seat to the word of God, for God alone is the source of all authority: “Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Mt 28:18). Christ is the head of his body the church, so his word must ever remain the ultimate authority in the church. The authority of God’s word stands on its own merits because it is authoritative (*norma normans*): “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2Ti 3:16).

The only authority anyone has in the church comes either directly from God himself (the word and sacraments) or are of human content and origin. Anything of human content and origin is only as authoritative for the church as the church itself by mutual agreement says it is. We Lutherans have agreed that our Lutheran confessions are also authoritative (*norma normata*) for us because (*quia*) they agree with God’s word, but we cannot expect any non-Lutheran to acquiesce to them as authoritative. The constitutions and bylaws of our synod, districts, congregations, and other organizations are authoritative among us because they are written

expressions of how we in Christian freedom have chosen and agreed to operate. They describe the orderly manner in which we have chosen to lovingly deal with one another as we seek to do our Savior's work together. But no bylaw or policy can supplant the absolute authority of the Bible.

Recall that the priesthood of all believers means that no Christian is under any human spiritual authority, but only under that which God has established. We may choose to cede the right of doctrinal oversight and supervision to an individual or to a synod, but we are not required by God to do so. If we did not wish to have a circuit pastor or district president overseeing our doctrine and practice, we ought not to have applied for membership in the synod, for such supervision is one role of the synod to which every pastor, teacher, and congregation agrees when he/she/it joins the synod.

Any clerical hierarchy which may exist in the church is of human origin and not of divine right, but as free priests of God the church is free to set up any hierarchical structure that it chooses. To insist on any particular form of hierarchy as having divine approval as opposed to other forms goes beyond Scripture and is legalistic. In our church body we employ a combination of various models of church polity. We have, in varying degrees, a "congregational" polity. A typical congregation's constitution includes statements such as the following:

"In all matters of Christian faith and life the word of God is supreme."

"The congregation, as represented by the voters' assembly, shall have the right of decision in all matters not otherwise decided by the word of God."

"The church council, any other elected committee or organization within the congregation, and any of its elected or appointed officers shall have no power or authority beyond that conferred upon them by the congregation. However, the church council in an emergency may act in the name and for the welfare of the congregation. Such action must be submitted for approval at the next meeting of the voters' assembly."

"The congregation has the exclusive right to call pastors and teachers."

With such statements we seek to guarantee the autonomy of our congregations, and of our voters assemblies in particular. Our local congregations are very important to us, for there the word and sacraments are employed and enjoyed by more people more often and to a greater extent than anywhere else. We tend to prefer to have decisions made as close to the "grass roots" level as possible. None of this is God-ordained as such. This is merely the way that we have chosen to do business.

But our church is not purely congregational in polity. We also seem to like the "presbyterian" model. Our congregations put a lot of faith in the deliberations and decisions of our church councils. The "presbyters" of our churches make quite a few of the decisions. Many voters' assembly meetings are attended only by members of the council and two or three others who happen to show up -- usually men who have served on the council in the past, or are taking that proverbial "year off" before being elected to another term.

We even employ the "episcopal" model of polity. Our teachers are under the doctrinal supervision of their pastors. Our pastors are under the doctrinal supervision of district presidents and their right-hand men, the circuit pastors. Our synodical officers are given various supervisory functions over the constituents of the synod. Once again, this is not bad. As priests of God, free of any and all ceremonial law, we have the God-given freedom to organize our congregations, synod, and church societies in whatever manner we choose. The particular form of church polity is an adiaphoron, but that we must have some polity is NOT an adiaphoron. We are bound only by faith and by God's law of love, which necessitates orderliness. Therefore, we are free to set up our polity however we like, as long as we don't insist that we have Biblical mandate or support for our chosen polity beyond the commands of faith, love, and orderliness.

We violate the Christian liberty of others if we condemn a church body for organizing however they choose, as long as they do not violate the biblical principles of faith, love, and orderliness, or claim that they have biblical mandate or support for their chosen polity. And it is sin to maintain any form of church polity which proves to be a stumbling block to the faithful, loving, and orderly administration of the Keys. The church

has no right to violate any other biblical principles when exercises its liberty to set up its polity as it chooses. It is always bound by Christ's Great Commission, as well as orderliness, faith, and love. For example, we may not broach the biblical principles of the roles of man and woman. We may not set up our polity in such a way as to protect or defend any association with false teachers or heterodox churches.

Christ has called human beings to positions of authority in his church. Whatever authority each has is given to him by virtue of his divine call, i.e., it is God's own authority communicated to him through the church. The freedom God has given to Christians allows the church to organize the specific duties of any particular call in whatever way that the church deems appropriate. What has God called you to do? Read your call document, your diploma of vocation, together with any "cover letter" that might have been sent along with it. Then listen carefully when the calling body tells you orally exactly what they expect of you, for that is what God is calling you to do.

In our synod we have various types of ministers of the gospel, or to say it another way, the ministry is found in many different forms in our midst. Surely nobody would deny that a parish pastor is a minister of the gospel. Yet even in a synod such as ours, which has been blessed by God with a wonderful, extensive system of educational institutions from nursery school through post-graduate seminary, we occasionally hear of some who don't think that a teacher in our schools should be considered a minister of the Gospel. Remember, Christ instituted one ministry of the Gospel and has allowed the church to organize that ministry in whatever forms seem best to the church. Take the local parish Lutheran elementary school, for example. There the children are taught the word of God daily, and not merely in "Word of God" class! There the teachers model the word for the students every minute of every day. There God's word always reigns supreme over every discipline and subject that is taught. There the children learn about the wonderful works of God and his amazing creation in the light of Scripture rather than human reason alone. There the children daily confess their sins and hear of God's gracious forgiveness. There the children learn to live and deal with each other, their fellow church members with whom they will one day be serving in the voters' assembly, Ladies Aid, or whatever. There the office of the public ministry is held before the children daily as being the highest calling to which a young person can aspire, and there most of the future pastors, teachers, and missionaries of our synod receive their elementary education. No one but a minister of the Gospel, called and assisted by the Holy Spirit, is equipped for such a calling. If we do not believe that our teachers need to be trained first and foremost as ministers of the Gospel, then we either do not understand what makes full-time Christian education special and unique, or else we do understand and yet still prefer to forego the effort and expense.

What we have written about the Lutheran elementary school is also true about the Lutheran high school and college. The difference is that these institutions of higher education are generally conducted by more than one local congregation (as are a few of our elementary schools). These "federations" or "associations" which conduct such schools are indeed "church," just as synod is church, and just as the local congregations are church, for they are all made up of believers. Such federations of Christians also have the Keys, and Christ is in their midst. This gives such schools authority to call ministers of the Gospel and to forgive and retain sins. For the sake of brotherliness, orderliness, and practicality, most area schools do not excommunicate or distribute the sacraments (not that they could not, but they realize that they have not been specifically called to do so by the federation of Christians who established them). To do these things without a specific call to do so could cause confusion and inconsistent practice. It could also cause Christians in local congregations to feel as though their 'turf' is being violated. Normally it is wise to let local congregations do what they can do best, to let area high school federations do what they are equipped to do best, and to let circuits, conferences, districts and synod do whatever they do best.

By common consensus our churches call pastors and give them complete oversight of the entire ministry of the Keys in their respective congregations. The pastor's divine call gives him the authority and responsibility to preach and teach the entire congregation the word of God, to administer and distribute both sacraments, to counsel the erring and inquiring, to visit the sick and shut-ins, and to maintain sound Lutheran practice and Christian discipline. Realizing that the pastor cannot do all the ministry of the word for the congregation, each congregation calls certain individuals to assist with the work of administering the Keys. Church councilmen

immediately jump to mind, especially the board of elders. Because the pastor cannot teach all of the Bible Information Classes, Adult and Teen Bible Classes, Sunday School, Vacation Bible School and Lutheran elementary school classes, most congregations call other Christians to help with these teaching responsibilities. Although the scope of the duties of each of the various teachers is unique, the essence of their divine call is the same as that of the pastor's call: to administer the Keys in the name of Jesus Christ and his church. What Christ instituted was the office (i.e., the function or task) of administering the Keys, not the job title. The Christian ministry is the function of proclamation, not a caste of men! St. Paul says that the Christians at Corinth were Christians because of what the missionaries had done among them, namely, they had proclaimed the Gospel: "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2Co 3:3). It is not the teacher but the teaching which creates and sustains faith: "Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also" (Jn 15:20). And remember, a person is a public minister of the Gospel only insofar as he has been called, i.e., given the authority, to publicly administer the Keys, and within the limits of his call.

If a pastor was called to oversee the entire administration of the Keys and to establish sound Lutheran practice in a particular parish, as is usually the case in our synod, then all others who are called to teach God's word in that parish must submit to the pastor's authoritative supervision. This is perfectly clear in the call diploma of Lutheran elementary school teachers which is commonly used in our synod. Points Five and Six say: "[We solemnly charge you] ... 5) To endeavor earnestly to live in Christian harmony with the pastor; 6) To submit to the supervision of the pastor and others who are responsible for the conduct of the school, and ... to do everything within the limits of your call for the general advancement of the kingdom of Christ." Wisdom tells a pastor to stand back and let the teachers under his supervision do what God has called them to do and what they have been trained to do. Yet faithfulness to his own divine call and concern for the spiritual welfare of all the flock, including the welfare of his teachers, will move a good pastor to keep a loving and watchful eye on the school, its teachers and students. After all, the pastor is responsible for overseeing the spiritual welfare of the entire parish. He has also been trained to teach, and if he had not been recognized as one who possesses the gift of teaching he would not have been declared by the church to be a candidate for the holy ministry. Still, few pastors have been trained specifically in the operation of a school, so the wise pastor will let the experts in his congregation (i.e., the professionally trained teachers and principal) do the best they can to fulfill their God-given calls.

The concept of authority in the church is very different from the concept of authority in the world. Jesus' own apostles couldn't get that straight until after Pentecost. They were often angling for positions of authority in the Messiah's kingdom. James and John even had their mother intercede with Jesus in an attempt to secure the top positions of authority (cp. Mt 20:20-23 to Mk 10:35-41). "Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'" (Mk 10:42-45). Authority in the church is to be exercised in the interest of those being served, not in the interest of the person in authority. Authority in the church is to be modeled after and motivated by the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ.

St. Luke records the way that Jesus dealt with the apostles during the Last Supper when they were still angling for authority over one another: "Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'" (Lk 22:24-30).

Brenz explains concerning the power of the those who are called “clerics”:

Since the apostles, bishops or pastors [pfarherrn] were called “ministers [ministri] and stewards [dispensatores],” that is “servants [knecht]” and “attendants [diener],” there has been given to them no other power than to servants, for the calling of God the Lord [is] to preach and to proclaim, and by such calling neither to take away nor to add, Deuteronomy 12:32-13:1: “What I have commanded you, do it, only do not add anything to it nor take anything from it”; the last chapter of Matthew, verse 19: “Go forth and teach everything that I have commanded you.”

Therefore no bishop or priest may forbid that which God has not forbidden, and permit that which God has not permitted²⁰

By his words and by his own example at the Last Supper, Jesus taught his disciples about Christian authority, contrasting the attitude and application of authority in the church with authority in the world. St. John tells us how Jesus got up from the table, stripped down to a waist towel (as a common servant would dress), and proceeded to wash the feet of the disciples. This task was generally given to the lowest slave on the household totem pole. Afterwards, Jesus got up, dressed, and returned to his place at the table. Then he taught his disciples a very important lesson, one which every messenger of the Gospel must learn: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (Jn 13:13-17). This is what authority in the church is about!

These are biblical principles of the church and the ministry which we must constantly seek to apply in all of our ecclesiastical polity. Power struggles and politics, turf wars and personality conflicts will never help us do the Lord’s work. Let us seek to exercise whatever God-given authority we have by virtue of our divine calls by asking not “Who will wash my feet?” but rather “Whose feet may I wash?”

SOLI DEO GLORIA

²⁰ My own translation of Johannes Brenz’ *Underrichtung der Zwispaltigen Artikel Christenlichs Glaubens*, published by Martin Brecht, Gerhard Schäfer and Frieda Wolf, Johannes Brenz Frühschriften, Teil 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1970), p. 98.

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