

JOHANN WILHELM FRIEDRICH HOEFLING: THE MAN AND HIS ECCLESIOLOGY

Part 3—His Doctrine of the Ministry

Joel L. Pless

In the near two millennia of church history, some Christian theologians have earned a reputation—deservedly or undeservedly—of being theological “Johnny one-notes.” Irenaeus perhaps is best remembered for his recapitulation theory, Anselm for his atonement theory, John Tauler for his mysticism, and John Calvin for his emphasis on the sovereignty of God and predestination. By most accounts Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling is similarly remembered. Despite writings that many would consider voluminous, Hoefling is primarily remembered for his doctrine of the ministry.

This article continues the *WLQ* series on Hoefling’s life and ecclesiology, with this issue focusing on how he understood the ministry. What will especially be examined is whether Hoefling regarded the public ministry as divinely instituted and whether he regarded the ministry as more form or more function. The primary source of Hoefling’s ecclesiology is his *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung (Principles of Evangelical-Lutheran Church Polity)*, which was first published in the journal *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* in 1850 and which underwent two later editions, with the third edition being published in 1853, the year of Hoefling’s death. Manfred Kiessig, who has written the most complete work on Hoefling, most often cites the third edition in his opus.¹ This edition rightly is considered to be Hoefling’s last word on where he stood on the ministry, and this will be the edition which will be referenced in this article. No significant part of *Grundsätze* has ever been translated into English. References in English are largely limited to brief quotations or secondary references.

Although Hoefling is frequently cited and criticized in various dogmatic works which address the Lutheran understanding of the ministry, only two authors have published scholarship on Hoefling’s understanding of the ministry that is of any significant length. None of this scholarship has been translated in English. Swedish Lutheran

¹Manfred Kiessig, *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling: Leben und Werk, Die lutherische Kirche, Geschichte und Gestalten*, Band 14 (Gütersloher, Germany: Gütersloher Verlagshaus—Gerd Mohn, 2003), p 409.

theologian Holsten Fagerberg is best known for his *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions 1529–1577*, but Fagerberg's dissertation in book form, *Bekennntnis, Kirche und Amt in Der Deutschen Konfessionellen Theologie Des 19. Jahrhunderts (Confession, Church and Office in the German Confessional Theology of the Nineteenth Century)* contains only a chapter which discusses Hoefling's "sacramental" understanding of the office of the church.² Manfred Kiessig provides a thorough treatment of Hoefling's ministerial view in his 1991 book, *Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling: Leben und Werk (Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling: Life and Work)*. Since Kiessig quotes extensively from *Grundsätze* in his presentation of the major aspects of Hoefling's understanding of the ministry, his outline will be followed in this article, with additional insights from Fagerberg. Kiessig's treatment of Hoefling's understanding of the ministry runs forty-four pages. Space considerations require that only a broad outline of Hoefling's ministerial view be given here.

Despite the fact that Hoefling taught practical theology at Erlangen, Kiessig describes him as a systematician in his approach to studying theology, a theologian who tolerated no unclarity and who understood the maxim that theology is about definitions and distinctions. Thus it is Kiessig's conclusion that Hoefling's ecclesiology—his understanding of the church proper—impinges upon his understanding of the ministry (*die Lehre vom geistlichen Amt*).³ According to Kiessig, Hoefling regarded important distinctions in ecclesiology—such as the distinction between the invisible and visible church and the distinction between the order of salvation and church order—as closely related to another distinction in the doctrine of the ministry, the differentiation between office (*Amt*) and station or position (*Stand*). Hoefling's deeply held belief that there can be no "ceremonial-legalistic institution" which mediately thrusts itself between believers and Christ⁴ impinges on his view of ministry. Hoefling would regard such a ceremonial-legal institution as a betrayal of Protestantism and a return to Roman Catholicism. Thus Hoefling concludes that the assertion that a specific spiritual station (*geistliche Stand*) is instituted by God contradicts both principles of Protestantism: the formal principle of Scripture gives the Scriptures into the hands of the congregation, so that it can judge the doctrine of the office holders, and the material

²Holsten Fagerberg, *Bekennntnis, Kirche und Amt in Der Deutschen Konfessionellen Theologie Des 19. Jahrhunderts*, (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksells Boktryckeri AB, 1952), p 273–285.

³Kiessig, p 138.

⁴Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling, *Grundsätze evangelisch-lutherischer Kirchenverfassung*, 3rd ed, sehr vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage (Erlangen, Germany: Theodore Blasing, 1853), p 40; Kiessig, p 138–139.

principle of justification demands the immediate relation of believers to Christ.⁵

Hoefling does not deny that the Great Commission of Jesus Christ in Matthew 28—to preach the Word and to administer the sacraments—is divinely instituted. In this sense the public ministry is an ecclesiastical office, but this must be clear from its different supporting passages.⁶ Kiessig explains Hoefling's basic conception of the ministry this way: "The 'office by itself' (*an sich*) is instituted (*eingesetzt*) by Christ and belongs to the order of salvation (*Heilsordnung*), the calling of particular persons in this office and with it the spiritual station belongs to the order of the church (*Kirchenordnung*).⁷ That the church calls individual Christians into the office that it hands down arises not from an external divine law, but from an inner necessity (*Notwendigkeit*). Otherwise the office would be a third means of grace alongside Word and Sacrament, in fact the most important one.⁸ Hoefling believed it was necessary to maintain a distinction between office and station. Central to Hoefling's thought is the centrality of the gospel in the life of the church. He was constantly fearful that the gospel would be adulterated into a new law (*nova lex*). Hoefling reproaches Lutheran orthodoxy for not making this distinction clear.⁹ In order to bring clarity to discussion about church and ministry in his day, Hoefling authored his *Grundsätze*. Kiessig describes this seminal work as Hoefling's attempt on the basis of the previously mentioned distinctions to present the doctrine of the spiritual office up to and including the practical consequences.¹⁰

In what way did Hoefling believe the ministry was divinely instituted? He believed that the means of grace—the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments—was instituted by God, as described in Article V of the Augsburg Confession. Kiessig asserts that with this proposition, Hoefling concurs with all other Lutherans.¹¹ According to Kiessig, Hoefling's difference from other positions is first reflected when it comes to the particular definition of the concept *ministerium* (ministry).¹² Kiessig identifies Hoefling as a

⁵Hoefling, p 39f.

⁶Hoefling, p 75; Kiessig, p 139.

⁷Hoefling, p 25; Kiessig, p 139.

⁸Hoefling, p 227; Kiessig, p 139.

⁹Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Höfling, "Ein vorläufiges Wort über des Herrn Pastor Löhe neue Aphorismen," *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* NF XXII, 1851: p 308; cited in Kiessig, p 139.

¹⁰Kiessig, p 139.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

theologian who had a functional view of “the ministry”: “Hoefling understands [the ministry] as strictly functional.”¹³ Hoefling consistently follows a line of thought that the ministry is not as much an office (*Amt*) as it was a *function* (*Dienst*). In his 1853 edition of *Grundsätze*, Hoefling, in discussing the Latin text of Augsburg Confession V, unequivocally describes the ministry as “the divinely instituted ministry (*Dienst*), the divinely instituted function of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments.”¹⁴ Hoefling seems to regard AC V as describing the ministry only in an abstract sense, with mention of the persons who exercise the functions of the ministry—ministry in the concrete sense—first appearing in AC XIV. Kiessig provides this interpretation of what Hoefling actually meant by the concept of the institution of the office (*Amt*): Hoefling believed that not only were the means of grace instituted, but also the function of their administration and their use.¹⁵

Since Hoefling believed that the function of the administration of the means of grace was divinely instituted, there was also an office that was divinely instituted, and that was the office of the means of grace. Since this office involved divine actions toward mankind, Hoefling spoke of the “sacramental office,” and distinguished this from what is “sacrificial,” basically how believers served God with their lives. Hoefling developed this distinction between sacramental and sacrificial from Apology XXIV. But Hoefling’s uncharted ecclesiology further advanced when he extended this distinction into all areas of church life.¹⁶ Kiessig comments: “The concept is employed here in a wider sense than in sacramental theology.”¹⁷ Hoefling defined the sacramental office as God’s service (*Dienst*) to mankind, procured through Word and Sacrament, and the sacrificial functions as the service (*Dienst*) of people before God in varied forms. A significant portion of Hoefling’s *Grundsätze* is devoted to his remarks which differentiate sacramental functions from sacrificial functions. This sacramental vs. sacrificial aspect of Hoefling’s understanding of the ministry is the subject of Fagerberg’s study on Hoefling’s view of the ministry.¹⁸ An overarching theme of Hoefling’s view of ministry is the application (*Vollzug*) of the means of grace, which he considered to be divinely established. Hoefling emphasized this before other ecclesiastical functions.¹⁹

¹³Ibid.: “Höfling versteht ihn streng funktional.”

¹⁴Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 223: “der göttlich eingesetzte Dienst, die göttlich eingesetzte Funktion der Predigt des Wortes und der Spendung der Sakramente.”

¹⁵Kiessig, p 139–140.

¹⁶Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, 33ff; Kiessig, p 140.

¹⁷Kiessig, p 140.

¹⁸Fagerberg, p 273–285.

¹⁹Kiessig, p 140.

J. W. F. Hoefling demonstrated a marked tendency to overemphasize certain biblical aspects of ecclesiology to the seeming detriment of other biblical truths. His strong emphasis on the application of the means of grace compelled him to be skeptical of the establishment of a specific pastoral ministry (*Hirtenamtes*) to apply these means of grace. To be sure, he does not disavow that the ecclesiastical office also includes the pastorate in itself,²⁰ but he sees that, where this concept is used as comprehensive definition of the office, an un-Lutheran concept of the office is at work.²¹ Once again we see developing in Hoefling's thought a familiar theme. He is adamant against any kind of established form of the ministry, for in that he sees a return to ceremonialism and legalism, i.e., Roman Catholicism, or at the very least, a Romanist view of the ministry. Hoefling worked to avoid equating the office of the ministry to the pastoral ministry. He was convinced that once this was done, there appeared predominately "a supervisory and governing office, in which the means of grace are subordinated."²² Hoefling was convinced that once this happened, a divinely instituted station of pastors (*Hirten*) is put forth, and the church is made into a "ceremonial, legalistic means of salvation institution" (*Heilsvermittlungsanstalt*).²³ Ultimately what would result is that the administration of the church would be done through the clergy, while the laity would be silenced. As Hoefling understood things, the final consequence of defining the ministerial office as strictly the pastoral office was to end up with a Roman Catholic concept of ecclesiology.²⁴

While Hoefling can rightly be described as a "functionalist" in his basic understanding of the ministry, other aspects of his ministerial view are quite mainstream. In line with AC XIV, Hoefling was insistent that no one could serve in the public ministry unless he was properly called. He wrote of such a call as an "inner or intrinsic necessity" and that such a call was a "mediated, derived, and developed command of God."²⁵ In describing the relationship between the universal priesthood of all believers and the public ministry, Hoefling championed the former, seemingly at the expense of the latter. He seemed to identify the ministry (*das Amt*) with the priesthood of all believers, following the consistent rationale that since all Christians have an immediate (*unmittelbares*) relation to the means of grace, the universal priesthood is the primary holder of the ministry, with the public office holders as

²⁰Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 215ff.

²¹Kiessig, p 140.

²²Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 114; Kiessig, p 141.

²³Kiessig, p 141.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 260ff; Kiessig, p 147-148.

the secondary possessors of the ministry (*Amt*). Hoefling saw the universal priesthood as divinely instituted by God (*göttliche Einsetzung*), whereas he wrote concerning the public ministry more of an intrinsic necessity or imperative (*innere Notwendigkeit*).²⁶ Hoefling's view of ordination is also recognizably confessional Lutheran. According to Hoefling, ordination is an act in which the church publicly demonstrates the aptitude and inner calling of a Christian, demonstrates to him that he has a legitimate call, the outer calling into the ministry, and an act in which the church gives and requests the blessing of God on the candidate.²⁷ Through ordination, the church imparts to individual Christians the empowerment and entitlement to act with official authority in the church in behalf of the Christian community, to preach the Word of God publicly, and to administer the sacraments.²⁸ Kiessig concludes that according to this definition, Hoefling regarded ordination as belonging to the acts of benediction in church rites.²⁹

J. W. F. Hoefling wrote his seminal *Principles of Evangelical Lutheran Church Polity* in the midst of intense discussions in nineteenth-century Germany. The Prussian Union, the confessional Lutheran reaction to it (*Die Erweckung*), and the 1848 uprisings in several German cities created a volatile environment in both church and state. Discussion and debate about governance and polity took place at a feverish pitch. In this climate and culture, Hoefling outlined his understanding of church and ministry for confessional Lutheranism. His "low" view of the ministry has produced numerous reactions in both Europe and America. While Adolf Hoenecke refers to Hoefling about the ministry only once in his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*,³⁰ more extensive reactions are found in Franz Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*³¹ and in Kurt Marquart's *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*.³² In each of these evaluations the verdict is similar: Hoefling believed that the concrete office of the ministry is a

²⁶Kiessig, p 150.

²⁷Johann Wilhelm Friedrich Hoefling, "Der Gegensatz des Protestantismus und Katholicismus im Betreff der Lehre von der Ordination und dem Kirchenamte," *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* 1, 1838: p 41f; cited in Kiessig, p 162; *Grundsätze*, p 101.

²⁸Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 96.

²⁹Kiessig, p 162.

³⁰Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 4, trans. Joel Fredrich, Paul Prange and Bill Tackmier, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), p 189.

³¹Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p 443-449.

³²Kurt E. Marquart, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics, vol. 9, eds. Robert D. Preus and John R. Stephenson, (Fort Wayne: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990): p 112n-115; 116-117; 119; 124; 124n; 220.

human institution and thus he denied the divine institution of the public ministry. Consequently his view of the ministry is an aberration from biblical truth and sound Lutheran doctrine.

If Hoefling's doctrine of the ministry has been accurately and fairly presented, it is important to pinpoint exactly where and why he went into a theological ditch regarding the ministry. As stated before in this series, Hoefling in many regards is a sympathetic character. He was a textbook example of a German *Wunderkind*. But unlike many German prodigies, Hoefling did not renounce the confessional Lutheranism in which he was raised—he embraced it—and sought to be a competent and conscientious representative of it as he taught at Erlangen in largely Roman Catholic Bavaria. Yet in regard to articulating the New Testament witness to the doctrine of the ministry, Hoefling outdid himself. Loathing a return to Roman Catholicism and a Romanist view of the ministry, Hoefling conceptualized his theology in a very Lutheran way—according to the broad outlines of the formal and material principles of the Reformation—the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of justification. Most of the time, Hoefling landed on his feet, but with the doctrine of the ministry, his insistence that there were no ceremonial or legal regulations in the New Testament led him to deny that Jesus Christ specifically instituted the public ministry. Hoefling believed that Jesus Christ founded the church and the means of grace, but he saw the church as being the originator of the public ministry, largely as a matter of necessity and expediency. He regarded the functions of the ministry and the actual means of grace themselves—the Word of God and the two sacraments—as divinely instituted, but not the actual ministerial office itself—as least not in the concrete sense. On this point, Marquart observes:

‘In the abstract,’ that is, considered simply as the *functions* of proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments, even Höfiling cheerfully granted the divine institution of the ‘ministry.’ A ‘ministry in the abstract,’ however, is as fanciful as an abstract Gospel and abstract sacraments.³³

In another section of his dogmatics text, Marquart sums up how and why, in his opinion, Hoefling drove into a ditch in describing his view of the ministry:

Although Luther emphasized ‘order’ as a reason why the church’s Gospel office must be committed to particular men for its public exercise, he meant by this not a man-made, ceremonial, ritual order—as Höfiling misunderstood the matter later—but an order established by divine mandate, that is, a divine order.³⁴

³³Marquart, p 124.

³⁴Ibid., p 116.

So in summary, Hoefling's concern to avoid New Testament ceremonial and legalistic regulations and his desire not to turn the public ministry into a third means of grace is to be commended, but his concerns ultimately drove him into a proverbial theological ditch by denying a New Testament divine institution of the public ministry.

To date the most complete writing in the WELS about Hoefling's doctrine of the ministry is contained in Carl Lawrenz's 1982 *WLQ* article: "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry." In his discussion of Walther's Thesis III on the ministry, Lawrenz summed up Hoefling's doctrine this way:

Hoefling recognized only the rights and the commission of the universal priesthood of all believers as divinely bestowed and instituted and held that the church of itself developed the public ministry to satisfy a need that always arises when all members of a group share common rights and obligations which they cannot under certain circumstances all exercise and carry out at one and the same time. In such circumstances a group out of expediency generally solves the problem by delegating individuals in its midst who are best qualified to do so to exercise the common rights and to carry out the common obligations for them and in their behalf so that everything will be done decently and in order.³⁵

Partially to answer accusations that the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod itself denies a divine institution of the ministry and shares Hoefling's position, the WELS at its 1969 convention adopted theses on church and ministry, prepared by the synod's Commission on Inter-Church Relations. The first thesis on the ministry states: "Christ instituted one office in His Church, the ministry of the Gospel."³⁶ Under the fourth thesis, [D], this statement is issued to distance the WELS position from Hoefling's as they perceived it: "Thus these public ministers are appointed by God. Ac 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28. It would be wrong to trace the origin of this public ministry to mere expediency (Hoefling)."³⁷

Lawrenz concludes his discussion of Hoefling by enunciating that the WELS stands with Luther and Walther on the divine institution of the public ministry. While agreeing with Hoefling that it is certainly expedient for there to be a public ministry, Lawrenz makes it clear that expediency is not what establishes the public ministry; it exists by divine mandate from Jesus Christ himself:

³⁵Carl J. Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Ministry," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 79 (Spring 1982): p 131—132.

³⁶Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), p 48.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p 49.

As pointed out in our previous presentation we, too, with Walther and Luther, on the basis of Scripture, recognize that the public ministry serves such a need. Yet in contrast to Hoefling we hold on the basis of Scripture, that it is not the church but our divine Lord himself, who before the New Testament church was ever called into existence, took note of its future need, prophesying in advance that he would take care of it through the gift of the public ministry, that he has set forth the qualifications for this public ministry for us in his New Testament word and continues to give to his church men with all the needed talents required to carry out all the tasks of the public ministry.³⁸

In the fourth and final installment of this series on Hoefling and his ecclesiology, the available empirical evidence will be examined to see if “the Wauwatosa Triumvirate” of John P. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller made use of Hoefling’s *Principles of Evangelical Lutheran Church Polity* in clarifying the Wisconsin Synod’s position on church and ministry.

In concluding this installment, it must be mentioned that Hoefling’s *Principles* was in its third edition at the time of his death at age 51. This might indicate that Hoefling saw his ecclesiology as a work in progress. Might he have modified or at least clarified his view of the ministry had his life not be cut short by a virulent blood disease? What is known for sure is that Hoefling engaged in a lively conversation with C. F. W. Walther on ecclesiology during Walther’s trip to Germany after Walther’s *Kirche und Amt* was accepted as the public doctrine of the Missouri Synod in 1851 but before the publication of *Church and Ministry* in 1852. Hoefling did not have long to reflect on the clearer presentation of Walther. Could he have been led to a clearer view or a clearer way of stating his views?

What Hoefling denied was “an external necessity due to a ceremonial legal precept or a special divine institution different from that of the general office of all Christians.” Was Hoefling denying any institution of the public ministry “different from the general office of all Christians” or was he denying only the existence of “a specific ceremonial legal precept” for specific forms to the exclusion of others? The first would be false, the second would be true. All the Synodical Conference writers who examined Hoefling’s position believed that his position was the first.

J. W. F. Hoefling sang some discordant notes in his writings on the ministry, yet his *Principles* also contain some excellent passages for Lutheran pastors and those training to be Lutheran pastors. Perhaps the best line in all of his *Principles of Evangelical Lutheran Church*

³⁸Lawrenz, p 132.

Polity is when Hoefling exhorts under-shepherds in the public ministry to see the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, as their model as they carry out their pastoral ministrations, for it is the Good Shepherd whom they represent through their divine calls.³⁹ Modeling one's ministry after Jesus Christ, the Lord of the church, is the only way the church will ever preserve for itself a pious ministry.

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³⁹Hoefling, *Grundsätze*, p 216.