

# **Crucial Issues For Lutheranism Today**

## **A Viewpoint From The WELS**

[Given in April 1995 at Chicago, IL for Northern Illinois District LCMS]

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### **Issue 1: The Gospel of Christ**

Will an objective atonement and objective justification remain the focus of Lutheran preaching?

Will Lutherans continue to preach one way to heaven?

### **Issue 2: The Law of God**

Will Lutherans continue to preach God's Law as a mirror, curb, and rule?

Will God's Law remain the norm for judging all thoughts, words, and actions?

### **Issue 3: The Inerrancy and Authority of Scripture**

What effects will the denial of inerrancy in much of world Lutheranism have on the preservation of Lutheran teaching?

Can confessional Lutherans ward off the deadly effects of the higher-critical approach to Scripture?

### **Issue 4: Church Fellowship**

Can confessional Lutherans maintain or regain the biblical principles of church fellowship which are necessary to preserve doctrinal integrity?

### **Issue 5: Church and Ministry**

Will confessional Lutherans maintain a balanced position which emphasizes both the priesthood of all believers and the called ministry of the Word, established by God? Will they express clearly the distinction between the two?

Will confessional Lutherans express clearly the relationship between the pastoral ministry and other forms of ministry?

### **Issue 6: The Roles of Men and Women in the Church**

Will confessional Lutherans resist the pressures of society and maintain a scriptural belief and practice concerning the roles for men and women which God established at creation?

## **CRUCIAL ISSUES FOR LUTHERANISM TODAY**

Your conference has invited a panel of speakers to address your conference on the topic "Crucial Issues For Lutheranism Today." Your arrangements committee has consciously chosen guest speakers who might reasonably be expected to hold different points of view about the subject at hand. I will make no effort to present a detached, neutral response to your question, "What are the crucial issues challenging Lutheranism today?" I will approach the subject from the particular (some might say the peculiar) doctrinal perspective of my church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Since I am addressing a LC-MS audience, I will focus on the doctrinal issues which I, as an interested outside observer, believe to be most crucial for the LC-MS internally, as well as for your relationships with the ELCA in one direction and the WELS in the other.

### **ISSUE 1) THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST**

The most crucial issue facing the Lutheran Church today, as in every age, is preserving the gospel of Christ. Today this gospel is under heavy attack within the Lutheran church. Certainly God's love and forgiveness are being preached in all Lutheran churches, but today there is frequently neglect or even direct denial of the objective payment which Christ made for sin. If I preach "God loves you and forgives you," I have not yet preached the gospel. To preach the gospel clearly I need to state "Jesus lived, died, and rose for you." I am not preaching the gospel unless I

emphasize the payment which Christ made as my substitute and the legal verdict of acquittal which God pronounced on the whole world. This message is the heart and core of all truly Lutheran preaching, but this is the very point which is being undermined within the Lutheran church in America today.

Lutherans are being told, “Jesus was born not to die, but to live for us. ... The cross is central to our preaching because it shows the depth of God’s love for us. ...Some preaching describes Jesus’ death as a payment to God’s wrath. This approach stresses guilt as a barrier to our entry into heaven. There is truth here, but this is only one of many ways the Scriptures proclaim the meaning of Jesus for us.” (*The Lutheran*, Mar. 30, 1988, p. 46) In such teaching the doctrine of the vicarious atonement is reduced to being one of several theories about the meaning of Christ’s death, rather than receiving the prominence which it does in Scripture.

A prominent American Lutheran theologian can write, “The meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. ... When the cross is viewed mythologically, and not simply as one historical event alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions” (I, 547,548). If such teaching prevails in the Lutheran church, Lutherans will be left with a crucifixion which is a means of salvation only when it is mythically interpreted.

The doctrine of justification by grace through faith is the central doctrine of biblical and Lutheran theology, but today the doctrine of Christ’s payment for sin is being stripped of its legal aspects. A prominent Lutheran dogmatician writes, “The historical event [of the cross] must be translated into eternal truth about the satisfaction of God’s honor, or elevated to a sublime example of dedication to whatever religious people are supposed to be dedicated to, or transcribed into a story about the deception of cosmic tyrants. None of that is evident from the event itself. It comes from the moral, mythological and metaphysical baggage we carry with us.”(II,79) and again, “There is no strange transaction that takes place somewhere in celestial bookkeeping halls to make it universal. The one we killed, the one no one wanted, is raised from the dead. That is all.” (II,92) Certainly the significance of the crucifixion must be explained. Scripture provides such an explanation, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.” This dare not be reduced to one of several theories explaining his death.

We should not be shocked that theologians who share the viewpoint cited in the preceding paragraph have surrendered the biblical teaching of justification in their dialogues with Roman Catholics. “Agreement in the gospel” no longer means acceptance of the biblical, Pauline, Lutheran doctrine that our sins are freely forgiven by the gracious verdict of God, not because anything which we have done, but solely on the basis of Christ’s perfect payment for sin. Today some Lutherans are reducing “agreement in the gospel” to the belief that somehow or other our salvation is ultimately dependent on God.

The biblical message that Christ paid for the sins of the whole world and that God has credited that payment to the whole world is being watered down to a ill-defined religious encounter. This is the greatest tragedy of contemporary Lutheran dogmatics. Lutherans who cherish the clear proclamation of the scriptural doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone as their greatest joy and privilege must vigorously oppose such teaching and strongly disassociate themselves from it.

Equally dangerous is the tendency toward universalism and pluralism within the more liberal elements of Lutheranism. Christ is not longer being upheld as the one way to heaven.

A well-intentioned desire to resist this trend has, however, produced an unfortunate overreaction among some confessional Lutherans, namely the denial of the teaching which was

called “objective justification” in old Synodical Conference terminology. This problem was explicitly addressed in the LC–MS’s fine 1983 statement on justification, but Lutherans can never be reminded too often that the focus of Lutheran preaching is Christ’s completed payment for sin and God’s objective verdict of acquittal pronounced for the whole world.

### **ISSUE 2) THE LAW OF GOD**

The reason many contemporary Lutheran theologians have difficulty coming to grips with the biblical concept of justification is that they have watered down the biblical concept of law. For them law and gospel are not distinct biblical teachings which assert certain truths. Law and gospel are defined as two different types of religious experience. Law is defined as “one way in which communication functions when we are alienated, estranged, and bound.” (II, 400) When God’s moral law is no longer an objective standard which defines what is right and wrong, the only possible result is moral chaos, in which subjective human opinion and emotions become the arbiters of morality. In such a climate, Lutherans can dismiss even the most basic principles of morality, which societies throughout history have recognized on the basis of the natural knowledge of the law. Two conspicuous examples of this are seen in the advocacy for abortion and homosexuality by many Lutherans.

Confusion about God’s law undermines the foundations of sanctification, but it ultimately undermines the foundations of justification. God’s verdict of justification is a legal verdict. It is his acceptance of a real payment of the penalty incurred by our sins against his law. A proper understanding of the gospel is impossible without a proper understanding of God’s law. Antinomianism always ends in antigospelism. For this reason the most crucial issue for Lutherans today is the clear Preaching of law and gospel in their proper God-given uses.

### **ISSUE 3) THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE**

The doctrine of biblical inerrancy has been consciously repudiated by the official doctrinal confession of two thirds of American Lutheranism. The ELCA’s confession of faith intentionally disavowed the doctrine of inerrancy which was asserted in the constituting documents of one of its predecessor bodies, the ALC. ELCA’s confession is clearly intended to reject verbal, plenary inspiration and to allow for the view that there are many errors in Scripture. This confession speaks highly of the Bible’s function, but much less highly of its content and accuracy.

This elimination of inerrancy is defended with the following words:

“The framers of the [ELCA] confession, following the insights of many Lutheran theologians, believe that this is a more accurate understanding of God’s intention for the Scriptures than the term inerrancy. The non-Lutheran, 19<sup>th</sup> century concept of inerrancy leads to many unhelpful misunderstandings and questions like inerrant in what way? Is the Bible inerrant in matters of history? genealogy, astronomy? These questions lead us directly away from the Scripture’s purpose, which is to declare Christ, that we might believe and be saved. The Bible is the source and norm of the church’s life, not because it gives us unerring information, but because God continues to speak through it. (*The Lutheran*, July 13, 1988, p. 46)

The church’s bishop explained this view in this way,

“The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as “norm” means Scripture as answer book.

I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important. ... But for us “norm” means “guide” rather than “rule.” Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us.” (*The Lutheran*, March 21, 1984).

According to this view the Scriptures are no longer written revelation from God, but the source of knowledge of revelation about faith. This means that Scripture does not reveal facts about God which are the basis for our faith, but tells us about the faith experiences of the early church so that we can have the same experience. This makes Scripture less than the “very words of God.” (Ro 3:2)

Confessional Lutherans certainly agree that the gospel is the heart of Scripture, but all other doctrines serve the gospel. The correct biblical teaching of a specific doctrine must be based on all of the passages which speak about that specific topic, not on some vague personal opinion deduced from a “principle of the gospel.” For example, the terrible reality of hell cannot be denied on the basis of the gospel proclamation of God’s love since many passages of Scripture clearly speak of hell. Every passage of Scripture is authoritative for the specific topic which it addresses.

A basic premise of much of contemporary Lutheranism is that the historical-critical method has made the traditional view of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture obsolete. The grounds for abandoning the doctrine of biblical inerrancy are the alleged exposure of many errors and contradictions in the biblical text and an alleged desire to avoid elevating the Bible as an idol above Christ. According to this view the Bible is the Word of God only in a derived way. The Bible is the Word of God, not so much because it was given by inspiration of God, but because it conveys the message of salvation. According to this view it is not possible to assume the literal historicity of events recorded in the Bible.

A prominent Lutheran theologian says,

“In modern Protestant fundamentalism [presumably groups like the WELS and LC-MS], which ironically claims to bear the legacy of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture is extended to include infallible information on all kinds of subjects. Fundamentalist biblicism is rejected by most theologians and is out of favor in most of the seminaries that train clergy for the parish ministry. They reject biblicism not merely because historical science has disclosed errors and contradictions in the biblical writings, but rather because the authority of the Bible is elevated at the expense of the authority of Christ and his gospel. Non-fundamentalist Protestants [i.e. ELCA] also accept the Bible as the Word of God in same sense, but they point out that the concept of the Word of God, as Barth made clear, cannot be confined to the Bible.” (I,74,75).

“Today it is impossible to assume the historicity of the things recorded. What the biblical authors report is not accepted as a literal transcript of the factual course of events. Therefore, critical scholars inquire behind the text and attempt to reconstruct the real history that took place.” (I,76)

The disastrous effects of this approach upon any attempt to produce a biblical dogmatics are exposed by the following statement:

“Critical attention to what the texts actually say has exploded the notion that one orthodox dogmatics can be mined out of Scripture. There are different theological tendencies and teachings in the various texts. Ecumenically this has led to the practical conclusion that the traditional demand for a complete consensus of doctrine may be wrong-headed, if even the Scriptures fail to contain such a consensus.” (I, 77)

It should be clear that meaningful doctrinal discussions are impossible between confessional Lutherans and the advocates of such critical views of Scripture. Where there is no agreement on the nature of Scripture as the norm of doctrine, attempts to reach doctrinal agreement are futile. Subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, important as it is, is no substitute for agreement on the doctrine of Scripture, because many contemporary issues, such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the role of women in the church, etc. are not explicitly dealt with in the confessions. Furthermore, those who limit their acceptance of the accuracy and authority of Scripture also qualify their subscription to the confessions.

The practical outcome of this is that since the ELCA has repudiated the inerrancy of Scripture and accepts the historical-critical approach to Scripture, and the LC–MS maintains the inerrancy of Scripture and repudiates negative critical views of Scripture, I do not see how it is possible to the LC–MS and ELCA to conduct profitable discussions on any other doctrinal issues unless their drastic disagreement concerning Scripture is first resolved.

The degree to which the critical view of Scripture has made inroads into ELCA was revealed in a recent poll in *The Lutheran* which revealed that although 60% of ELCA laypeople subscribe to scriptural inerrancy in some form, 80% of the clergy believe there are historical and factual errors in the Bible.

An alarming trend at the confessional end of the spectrum is the practice of some confessional Lutherans to mine the confessions and Lutheran fathers for quotations to establish the opinions about such topics as the moment of presence in the Lord's Supper, adoration of the elements, or particular views on the ministry and ordination as doctrines binding on the church. The confessions themselves do not wish to be a second source of doctrine, but a secondary source which testifies to the doctrine contained in Scripture. No doctrine can be established without Scripture, and in controversy confessional Lutherans should always turn first to Scripture, not the confessions.

*The issues we have been weighing up to this point are issues that focus on differences between the LC–MS and ELCA. The next issues focus more on differences between the LC–MS and WELS.*

#### **ISSUE 4) CHURCH FELLOWSHIP**

When you think of the Wisconsin Synod, what doctrine do you think of as its special emphasis? If a group of Lutherans were asked that question, we in the WELS hope that they would answer, “The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith, especially the truth of objective justification that God has declared the sins of the whole world forgiven for Christ's sake—that is the special emphasis of the Wisconsin Synod.” However, even though the doctrine of justification is the doctrine that holds first place in our hearts and in our preaching, it is probably not the doctrine which most people would mention as WELS's trademark. The first doctrine that most Lutherans would associate with the WELS is probably the doctrine of church fellowship or some aspect of it, such as closed communion or the WELS's opposition to lodges and scouting.

Although we certainly do not place the doctrine of fellowship ahead of justification, we are not embarrassed to have our name associated with the doctrine of church fellowship, since it is a scriptural doctrine which is crucial for preserving all other doctrines of Scripture.

A consideration of this doctrine is especially relevant to our discussion today, because disagreement concerning the principles and practice of church fellowship led to the end of the working partnership between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod which had endured for nearly a century. The most traumatic events of this twenty-five year dispute in the Synodical

Conference now lie more than thirty years in the past, but today the doctrine of fellowship still forms the most striking contrast between the Wisconsin Synod and almost all of the rest of Lutheranism. It also stands as an imposing obstacle in the way of any efforts toward re-establishing fellowship between the Wisconsin and Missouri synods.

“Christian fellowship” can, of course, refer to that spiritual fellowship which we have with God through faith in Christ, as well as to the spiritual fellowship which we have with all believers in the invisible church. We cherish these fellowships as a great blessing. But here when we speak about “church fellowship,” we are referring to outward, visible activities in which Christians join together in the visible church. “Church fellowship” in this sense can be defined as “every expression of faith in which Christians join together because their respective confessions have led them to recognize that they are agreed in the doctrines of Scripture.” Since we cannot see the faith in a person’s heart, such fellowship must be established on the basis of the individuals’ outward confession, expressed by church membership. If Christians agree on the doctrines of Scripture, they may practice church fellowship together. If they are not in agreement in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship.

The biblical concept of church fellowship as taught in Wisconsin Synod has sometimes been called the “unit concept” of church fellowship. This is an appropriate name, since church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit in two different respects. First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed as a basis for the practice of fellowship, they must be dealt with as a unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have the same divine authority, and we have no right to add anything to them or to subtract anything from them, the practice of church fellowship must be based on agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture. Second, the various types of activity which express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Since various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord’s Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership and joint prayer) are merely different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith, all expressions of church fellowship require the same degree of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture.

Since the WELS and LC–MS agree that unity in all doctrines is necessary for church fellowship, in contrast to the ELCA position that complete agreement is neither possible nor necessary, I will pass over this first point without any further discussion.

The second point is the crucial issue which separates the LC–MS and WELS. Can church fellowship, which requires complete agreement in doctrine, be limited to formal pulpit and altar fellowship? Do some expressions of a common faith, such as joint prayer, special worship services, or co-operation in charitable work, require a lesser degree of doctrinal agreement than sharing the Lord’s Supper or exchanging pulpits?

There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that some expressions of fellowship require different degrees of doctrinal unity. In the New Testament all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit. They are all ways of expressing the same faith

All Lutherans agree that the joint use of the means of grace is an expression of fellowship, even though they do not agree on the degree of doctrinal unity needed for such fellowship. It is crucial that confessional Lutherans maintain a sound position and practice concerning “closed communion.” If the principle is surrendered here in connection with the most intimate form of fellowship, what is left? The battle is lost.

Scripture deals with other so-called lesser levels of fellowship, such as doctrinal consultations, sharing of mission fields, exchange of fraternal greetings, co-operation in Christian charity work, and joint prayer, not with a rule book, but with general inclusive commands to “keep

away” from false teachers and to “have nothing to do with them.” Such broad commands certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them, including prayer, unless there is an express scriptural basis for making exceptions. “Have nothing to do with them” and “keep away from them” can hardly mean commend their work, have joint services with them, work with them, and pray with them.

Since the issue of joint prayer in intersynodical meetings was a particular sticking point between the LC–MS and WELS, I will expand on this topic very briefly. The dispute concerning the doctrine of fellowship in the Synodical Conference focused on joint public prayer with the leaders of other synods who were known to hold doctrinal positions in opposition to those of the synodical conference.

There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that prayer should be treated any differently from any other expression of fellowship. Since God-pleasing prayer always flows from faith, every prayer is either an expression of faith (and therefore an act of worship), or it is an abomination. If prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship. In some regards the issue of joint prayer is similar to the issue of infant baptism. Just as the command “Baptize all nations” includes children unless valid Scriptural reasons can be cited for excluding them, the commands to “keep away” from false teachers and to “have nothing to do with them” certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them, including prayer, unless there is an express scriptural basis for making exceptions. “Have nothing to do with them” and “keep away from them” can hardly mean pray with them.

[Early in this century the LC–MS took the lead in establishing the application of the practice that there should be no joint prayer with the leaders of synods which had broken fellowship with the Synodical Conference over the doctrine of election. Cf. Bente. When the Missouri Synod changed this position in the 1930s and 40s, it was clear to all parties that this was a change from the earlier practice of the LC–MS. This has also been acknowledged in recent writings of the current President of the LC–MS.]

There is no scriptural basis for dividing the various expressions of fellowship into different levels requiring different degrees of doctrinal agreement. Different forms of fellowship are simply different ways of expressing one and the same unity of faith. The only distinction between them is that some of these acts, such as any use of the means of grace and prayer, are by their very nature always expressions of shared faith, but other acts such as a handshake, a kiss, or giving to charity may also be done in a secular or social context and are, therefore, not always expressions of religious fellowship. The implications depend on the context in which they are done. [Examples: handshake]

It is my conviction that restoring the former principles and practices of church fellowship which were once the common position of the synods of the Synodical Conference is the most crucial issue facing the LC–MS today. Throughout the long history of American Lutheranism confessional Lutherans who refused to make a clean break with those who persisted in un-Lutheran, unbiblical doctrine lost their Lutheran heritage. The sad doctrinal deterioration in American Evangelicalism, which has accelerated in the last decade, is another evidence of the deadly effect of lax fellowship practices. A church body cannot remain confessional for long if it learns to live with doctrinal pluralism in its midst or tolerates an erosion of its testimony against heterodox churches.

## **ISSUE 5) CHURCH AND MINISTRY**

The doctrine of church and ministry is without doubt one of the hottest topics in Lutheranism today. The ELCA recently completed an inconclusive five-year study of the topic, which wrestled

with the possibility of establishing two levels of ordination. Within the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod current discussion centers on the relationship of the service of the laity to that of the called public ministry and on the relationship of other forms of ministry to the pastoral ministry.

During the years in which this issue was being strongly debated within the Synodical Conference the division was never strictly along synodical lines. Both before and after the breakup of the Synodical Conference many LCMS pastors held the “Wisconsin Synod view” and vice versa. In fact, one could compose an excellent summary of the “Wisconsin Synod view” on church and ministry using nothing but quotations from LC–MS sources. Today the disagreement between various viewpoints held within the LC–MS is much greater than the difference between the so-called Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod views as they have usually been expressed.

Although this is somewhat of an oversimplification, “the Missouri Synod position” has usually been thought of as asserting that the local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the church and that the pastoral ministry is the only divinely instituted form of the ministry. All other offices and forms of organization are human institutions, which are auxiliary to the divinely instituted forms. The most rigid version of this position would deny that the synod is church or that anyone other than a parish pastor is serving in the divinely instituted ministry. Some in the LCMS and in groups which have split from the LCMS hold this rigid view, but today most advocates of “the Missouri Synod view” seem to hold a modified version of this view.

Within the Wisconsin Synod there has been a general consensus that Christ established one ministry in the church, namely, the gospel ministry or the ministry of the keys, and that this one ministry may be exercised privately by any Christian and publicly by those who have been called by the church to do so. The public ministry has been instituted by Christ, but the church is free to create various forms of public ministry according to needs and circumstances. The form or forms into which the church organizes itself to carry out its work are not prescribed by Scripture, but are left free to the church.

The English word “minister” like its Latin parent originally meant “servant” and formerly referred to servants of every sort. Gradually however, “minister” came to be used almost entirely as a technical term for “pastor.” We must, therefore, warn against a simplistic parroting of the claim, “Everyone is a minister.” This claim can, however, be properly understood. If we use the words “minister” and “ministry” to refer to other forms of service in the church besides that of the pastor (such as the service provided by Christian teachers), we are simply returning to this wider usage of the term “service” or “ministry” found in the New Testament. In this sense everyone who is called by the church to carry out some service in their name is a “minister.” This is often called “public ministry.”

If Lutherans are going to use “ministry” in this wider sense, a number of cautions are necessary. Since the wider usage of “ministry” is labeled archaic by the English dictionary, to avoid confusion we must make it clear to our hearers that we are returning to a wider usage of the term “minister” than that which has been common in the recent past. Lutherans must be careful that they do not confuse the service which Christians do on their own initiative as part of the priesthood of all believers with the service which they carry out in response to the church’s call and in the name of the church (public ministry). We also must be careful that we do not diminish respect for the pastoral ministry, the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word. If “ministry” is going to be used in a wider sense which reflects both its Latin meaning and the usage of the Greek word *diakonia*, this should not be done without careful explanation of the shift in



usage, so that the distinction of the priesthood of all believers from the pastoral ministry and other forms of public ministry is not blurred or confused.

To summarize the dispute concerning the use of the term “ministry”:

a) In its widest and most basic sense the term “the ministry” refers to *the gospel ministry or the ministry of the Word* established by Christ and given to the whole church. This usage is essentially the same as our usage when we speak of the “ministry of the keys.” This one ministry of the Word is exercised in two ways, Privately and publicly.

[This wide usage of the term is present both in Scripture and the Confessions:

*Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!—2 Corinthians 3:7-9 Because the priesthood of the New Testament is the ministry of the Spirit (Latin) or an office (Amt) through which the Spirit works (German) as Paul teaches (2 Cor 3:6) it, accordingly has but the one sacrifice of Christ, which is satisfactory and applied for the sins of others... The ministry of the Spirit is that through which the Holy Spirit is efficacious in hearts. AP24, Trg.404.*

*The ministry of the Church, the Word preached and heard.. EP12, Trg.840.*

*That we might obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. AC5, Trg44.*

The Missouri Synod’s CTCR report accepts this wide usage of the term, but prefers the narrower use to refer to the public ministry “for the sake of clarity.” (p. 12)]

b) All Christians may exercise this ministry of the Word in their private dealings with others. They do this whenever they use God’s law to condemn sin and his gospel to proclaim forgiveness. This may be called *personal ministry* or private *ministry*. Such private ministry is part of the exercise of the priesthood of all believers.

c) Only Christians who are properly qualified and who are called by the church may exercise this ministry publicly, that is, in the name of the church. This may be called *public ministry* or *representative ministry*.

d) The *pastoral ministry* is the most comprehensive form of the public ministry of the Word, but it is not the only possible form. Sometimes when speaking of the pastoral ministry, we may call it “the public ministry,” “the ministry of the Word,” or even “the ministry,” but we should remember that in such cases we are using more inclusive names for the most common and comprehensive specific form of public ministry.

e) It is unwise to use the term “*lay ministry*” without careful explanation. This term is confusing because it does not distinguish clearly between service which lay people carry out privately as part of the priesthood of believers and that which they carry out publicly as called representatives of the congregation.

[[2) *Is the pastoral ministry divinely ordained in contrast to other forms of public ministry which are only human institutions or auxiliary offices to the pastoral ministry?*

It must be emphasized that the Wisconsin Synod position strongly defends the divine institution of the public ministry, including the pastoral ministry, every bit as fully as the “Missouri Synod position.” *The public ministry ... constitutes a special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel. (WELS Theses on Church and Ministry, IID)*

The WELS Theses do, however, deny that the pastoral ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord *in contrast to other forms of public ministry.* (II,D6) The reasons for this position include the following considerations:

- a) There is no divine command, comparable to the institution of baptism or the Lord's Supper, commanding the form which the public ministry of the Word should take in New Testament congregations. The situation, therefore, is somewhat analogous to the divine institution of government. That government is instituted by God is directly stated in Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, but there are no specific commands or regulations concerning the form of government. Although kings are mentioned as an existing form of government, the divine institution is not limited to monarchy, but applies to other forms developed by human beings. Therefore, specific forms of government are both divine institutions (Romans 13:1) and human institutions (1 Peter 2:13).
- b) Various forms of ministry existed in the New Testament churches. There is no indication that they were derived from the office of pastor, or even that the office of pastor existed in the exact form in which we have it today. The New Testament explicitly says there are "different forms of ministry" (1 Cor 12:5) Numerous examples show that this is true not only of ministry in the wide sense, but of public ministry of the Word as well. (1 Tm 4:13,4:11 3:2, 6:2, 3:5, 5:17, Eph 4:11, 1 Cor 12:28, Rom 12:6-8, etc.)
- c) Various forms of ministry have been recognized throughout church history, including the time of the Reformation. (Cf. especially LW 46:220)

How does this WELS' position compare with views current in the LCMS today? It is striking that in his important recent study of this doctrine Kurt Marquart begins with the statement, "At first sight the New Testament features a luxuriant and irreducible variety of offices" (p 120). He goes on to state, however, that behind the *appearance* of multiformity there is one basic ministry, the "one Gospel-ministry which is confessed to be divinely instituted in AC V." WELS would have no problem with this claim that there is one gospel ministry, as long as the public manifestation of that one gospel ministry is not narrowly limited to the pastoral office as we know it, but is inclusive of other forms of called ministry of the Word. Although the public ministry is divinely instituted, no single form of it [except perhaps for the apostolate] is divinely instituted by specific command and job description, not even the pastoral office as we have it today, which is a historical development.

There are positive points about Marquart's approach. He does not limit the one office only to the parish pastorate. He includes seminary teachers, for example, in the divinely instituted ministry of the Word. We would not quarrel with his assertion that the "diaconate" in Acts 6 was a human institution and an auxiliary office, in so far as it was limited to meeting the physical needs of members and in so far as it was distinguished from the ministry of the Word and prayer. Although we do not have this form of the office of "deacon" in the WELS today, we do have auxiliary positions in our synod and in our congregations which are filled by people whom we do not classify as called ministers of the Word.

Problems arise, however, when certain forms of ministry of the Word which the church has established are arbitrarily excluded from the ministry of the Word established by Christ. Marquart grants that teachers in institutes of theological training and possibly some catechists may be within the one gospel ministry, but asserts that Christian day school teachers whose main work is to teach secular subjects are not (p 141-142).

In his summary (p 144), Marquart states that the church has the evangelical freedom to create new auxiliary offices and to change old ones, to recognize and provide for specializations and concentrations within the one gospel ministry, to attach auxiliary functions to gospel

ministers or to detach them. Except for his distinction between the pastoral ministry as primary and all other offices as auxiliary, we could read this as a statement of the WELS position. Marquart's position is not as sharp a contrast with the "WELS position" as the more rigid version of "the Missouri Synod position" would be. There are potential openings for fruitful discussion between the two views, but there are remaining problems concerning the exclusion from the gospel ministry of certain offices which are regarded as only auxiliary.

[The LCMS-CTCR report limits "the office of the public ministry" to the pastoral ministry (p. 12). It includes district presidents, professors who prepare pastors, college deans or chaplains, and military chaplains in the pastoral ministry (p 21).]

### [[*The ordination of teachers*

In 1991 the WELS has authorized the ordination of male teachers. This was a controversial decision. It was defeated the first time it was presented, and it is being reconsidered. However, both those who are for and those who are against this practice recognize that this is an issue of adiaphora and tradition, not a question of scriptural doctrine.

The purpose of this change was to give a public testimony that the WELS classifies teachers as called ministers of the gospel, not as hired employees. There was no intention of removing necessary distinctions between the scope of the calls extended to pastors and teachers. There was no intention to authorize teachers to celebrate the Lord's Supper as some LCMS writers have incorrectly implied.]]

In resolving some of the current unrest concerning this doctrine it is crucial that confessional Lutherans focus on the following areas.

1) Initially, the discussion should focus on thorough exegesis of all of the pertinent passages of Scripture. Unless there is agreement on what Scripture says about the matter, little progress can be made by debating interpretations of the confessions, historical precedents and contemporary practices. Useful as they are, most recent works by adherents of the LCMS view have focused directly on the Confessions without laying an adequate foundation for this discussion in a thorough exegesis of Scripture. Lutherans must do a thorough study of the *norma normans* before we are ready to discuss our understanding of the *norma normata*. We must make a careful distinction between practices and terminology established by Scripture and practices and terminology established by tradition.

2) Terms must be defined clearly, so that people are not speaking past each other.

In what sense, is the term "ministry" being used? Unless there is clarification and understanding of the terms which are being used by various parties there will be continual confusion.

3) Lutherans must be careful that they do not minimize or undercut either the priesthood of all believers or the called public ministry of the Word which was established by God.

4) Lutherans must be careful that they do not under-emphasize either the institution by Christ or the call of the church when discussing the origin of the public ministry. "By Christ through the church" is the origin of all forms of ministry in the New Testament, except in those few cases where there was a direct call from Christ. "By Christ through the church" is also the position of Walther. (See his *Thesis 7* on ministry) An over-emphasis on the role of the public ministers, rather than the church, in the appointing of new ministers for the church is more sympathetic to the approach of Grabau than to that of Walther.

## **ISSUE 6) THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

In the ELCA this battle is pretty much over except for the ongoing disagreement about quotas. The LC–MS is trying to hold a middle ground, distinguished from the ELCA by its refusal to ordain women and from the WELS by its permitting women to vote in the governing assemblies of the church and to hold most offices except those of pastor and elder. The WELS naturally faces considerable pressure on this issue due to society and the changes adopted by other church bodies such as the LC–MS.

It seems to us that the LC–MS finds itself in this awkward middle position because it is approaching the question in the wrong way, namely, via its doctrine of the pastoral ministry, rather than on the basis of an exegetical study of the relevant passages of Scripture. The authoritative sources for any given doctrine are the passages of Scripture which deal with that particular topic. The authoritative sources for resolving this issue, therefore, are the passages which deal specifically with the order of creation and the role of women in the church, such as 1 Corinthians 11, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Timothy 2. These passages do not limit the application of the biblical principle concerning the roles of men and women to the pastoral ministry.

The resolution of this issue is especially crucial for the LC–MS because it involves all of the following crucial issues.

- a) How do we address doctrinal controversy in the church? What are the relative roles of Scripture, the Confessions, and tradition? Can passages of Scripture which are timeless in their application be obscured and eliminated by the use of hermeneutical methods borrowed from historical criticism?
- b) To what degree are we willing to reexamine our current practices on the basis of Scripture and, if necessary, to reverse direction?
- c) Are we willing to risk division of the church to maintain a scriptural stance?
- d) How much difference of opinion can we accept on this issue before it becomes divisive of fellowship?

This one issue may in some ways be the most crucial issue currently facing the LC–MS because it involves aspects and application of issues 2 - 5 discussed above, namely, the proper understanding of moral law, Scripture, fellowship, and ministry.

This one issue is a microcosm involving almost all of the crucial issues confronting confessional Lutherans today. It may well prove to be the bellwether on how they will go on all the rest. It also will give a clear indication of how confessional Lutherans will respond to the increasing pressures to conform to contemporary society, another crucial issue we do not have time to address today.

### **For Further Study**

The articles and books listed below are recent updates. The doctrinal statements on fellowship and church and ministry are available in booklet form.

#### **General**

John F. Brug, et al. *The WELS and Other Lutherans*, Northwestern Publishing House, in press.

John F. Brug, "The Doctrinal Position of ELCA," 1989. Five essays available from the files of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library.

Patsy Leppien and Kincaid Smith, *What's Going On Among the Lutherans?*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992. A very detailed doctrinal study.

David Jay Webber, "Is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Truly Lutheran?" Mankato, MN: ELS Board of Publications, 1988. Brief pamphlet.

Richard Krause, "Higher Criticism and the ELCA, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Fall 1992, p 243-265.

**LCMS-WELS issues**

Thomas Nass and Lyle Lange, "Inter-Christian Relationships—An Evaluation," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Summer 1992, p 217-222.

Wilbert Gawrisch, "Levels of Fellowship—Scriptural Principles or Rules of Men, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Winter 1991, p 3-14.

Armin Schuetze, "The WELS and the LCMS—Where Are We Now," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Fall 1988, p 261-286.

Martin Janke, "The WELS and the LCMS," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Fall 1986, p 250-257.

John Brug, "Working Together for the Truth—The Unit Concept of Church Fellowship,"

Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Summer 1986, p 168-183.

Series of Articles on the Ministry, Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, 1994 and 1995, one per issue.

Compendium of Articles on Church and Ministry, Two Large Volumes, available from WELS Board for Parish Services, \$25.00.

David Valleskey, "The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Spring 1991, p 83-123.

E.H. Wendland, "Church Growth Theology," Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, April 1981, p 101-120.