

Theological Observer

Why *Concordia* Theological Seminary?¹

Rev. Chairman Murray and honorable regents; Rev. Provost Gieschen and esteemed members of the faculty; officers and staff of our seminary; Presidents Ankerberg, Dawn, Egger, Thomas, and Winger; President Emeritus Wenthe and former President Rast; reverend fathers in the faith Harrison and Stuckwisch; CTSFW students and alums; brothers in the ministry; sisters in Christ who selflessly serve the physical needs of neighbors; Bruss family members—Jon and Marty, Kris, Ingrid and Peter, Felix, Laura Grace, Greta, and Huck—and our dear supporters from around the synod: How glad I am that you’re here today to celebrate this momentous occasion. The installation and inauguration of the seventeenth president of our Concordia Theological Seminary—of *your* seminary.

And what an honor it is to our entire seminary that you’ve joined us today as we celebrate a new chapter in the history of this place, where God’s word and our blessed confession have been faithfully taught for 178 years, whose thousands of graduates have gone to church and mission field to proclaim the eternal gospel of Jesus Christ, the victor over all sins and death and the devil’s power, and have come to the darkest of human suffering with the mercy of the saving God.

Today we gather not only to celebrate, but to beg of the Lord, unworthy though we are, for another 178 years of his faithfulness toward us, and until he returns; to implore him for workers for his harvest; and to beseech him to uphold and strengthen all of us for the work set before us.

Thank you for your presence. Thank you for your prayers. Thank you for governing our seminary. Thank you for your gifts in support of the work of our seminary. Thank you for your labor. Thank you for your faithful ministry and oversight of the ministry. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Concordia Theological Seminary.

On this occasion I want to take a moment to talk about that word, “Concordia,” and what it means for our seminary, for our church, for our life together, and I suppose to offer an apologia for it. We are not, after all, “Grace,” “Faith,” or “Christ” Seminary. We are *Concordia* Theological Seminary. Concordia—it’s not even a word in the Bible!

So why?

¹ Oration at the inauguration of Jon Stefan Bruss as the seventeenth president of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, September 8, 2024, in Kramer Chapel.

If the highest worship of God is faith in him, then, we might say, the second highest worship of God, or at least a derivative of the first, is confession.

That's how the psalmist speaks: "I have believed, therefore have I spoken" (2 Cor 4:13).² Elsewhere, "With the heart one believes and is justified; with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:10).

So closely intertwined are the two, in fact, that it's possible to say that faith simply cannot be apart from confession. Jesus to Martha: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" (John 11:25–27). "I believe." That's faith. Out loud? That's confession. Faith and confession go hand in glove.

In fact, faith begets confession, and confession in turn begets faith!

That's Paul's argument in Romans 10: "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (v. 17). The word of Christ is nothing other than the word about Christ, the word concerning Christ, the word emanating from Christ, the word delivering Christ, the confession of Christ. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," Peter intoned (Matt 16:16). In more developed creedal language, the Apostle Paul gives the word of Christ—his gospel—this way in the famous resurrection chapter of 1 Corinthians: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and . . . he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep," etc. (15:3–6). That's confession.

So what is it to confess?

We get a hint of it from the morphology of the Greek word itself: *ὁμολογέω*—*ὁμο*-, "the same"; *λογέω*, from *λέγω*, "say." One way to translate *ὁμολογέω*—weakly—is by the verb "agree." But that does get at something. In the Scriptures, *ὁμολογέω* does express agreement, but it's never mere assent or agreement; it's always the re-utterance of what God has already said, whether you're saying it back to God, as Martha did, or, as Jesus would have us do, saying it also before men, when he says, "everyone who confesses (*ὁμολογήσει*) me before men" (Matt 10:32), that they, too, might know the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom he has sent.

Confessing as repeating back what God has already said has a further implication. It means getting it right. Think back to Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt 16:16). Some years earlier at our Lord's Baptism, the voice of the Father had spoken from the cloud: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). So, when Jesus self-referentially asked the disciples, "Who, do men say, the Son of Man is?" (Matt 16:13) and they gave the myriad

² All Bible translations are my own.

responses they had heard—John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets (Matt 16:14)—they were giving “confessions,” but not the kind of confession that the Bible means. A biblical confession doesn’t just speak; it speaks back what God has revealed, and Peter got it right: “You are the Christ,” the fulfillment of the prophetic Scriptures, and “the Son of the Living God,” born of Mary, to be sure, but true God of true God, as the Father’s voice from the cloud had said.

That confession of Peter is the rock on which Jesus Christ himself has founded and continues to build his holy Christian church (Matt 16:18). And this introduces another dimension of confession: confession is all wrapped up in ecclesiology—in an account of the being of the church—and ecclesiology is all wrapped up in confession. This is naturally so: if the church is the gathering of the believers—of those who have faith—around word and sacrament (Acts 2:42; AC VII 1), and if those who have faith are compelled to confess, then the church as the gathering of believers must always be a confessing church. A church that doesn’t confess is an impossibility, and a church without a confession is an oxymoron. And already if you must countenance a ministry that comes with the word of Christ, equally oxymoronic is a ministry without a confession, for it is the confession of the ministry, the word of Christ in the confessing mouth of the ministry, that gives hearing, and hearing that gives faith, creating and sustaining the gathering of the believers (Rom 10:14–17). If faith is the thing that makes the believer a believer, you must also say that the confession of Christ is the thing that makes the church the church.

There’s yet another dimension of confession. Just note how frequently confession in the Bible comes about in the face of counterclaims. The religious leaders in Jerusalem had noticed the hubbub along the Jordan where John was baptizing. So they sent emissaries to ask who John was: was he the Christ? And John the Gospel writer writes that John the Baptist “confessed and he did not deny, and he confessed, that ‘I am not the Christ’” (John 1:20), which was as much as to say that the Christ is *Jesus* and *Jesus* is the Christ. Confession not only repeats back what God has already said; confession corrects error.

So in the Bible this is what we see concerning confession. First, a confession speaks back what God himself has said, often in a form whose brevity betrays the enormity of what it encompasses. Just think of Peter’s confession, “You are the Christ—the Messiah—the Son of the Living God.” Second, it informs and constitutes the church’s proclamation and thus forms the foundation of the church. It is ecclesiological: Paul went from synagogue to synagogue proclaiming that the Christ is Jesus. The churches that came into being as a result of that proclamation had that as their confession. Third, as with John the Baptist, it refutes error.

And that, friends, is the biblical shape of confession and *warrant for* confession.

Indeed, the history of the church demonstrates how the church received this witness of the Holy Scriptures. Creeds—in the shape of what we know today as the

Apostles' Creed—were put into broad use as the church sought to summarize the content of the Bible for baptismal catechesis. The creeds formed the basic claims and outline of the faith for the catechumens. The simple words of the Apostles' Creed cite no Scripture and yet are shot through with Scripture. They say back what the Scriptures have given them to say, which is to say, they say back what God himself has given them to say. The catechesis on their basis provided the scriptural warrant.

With the rise of heresies came a new phase: the use of the creed both to make a positive confession and to refute falsehood.

The first Nicene Creed—that is, the Nicene Creed prior to its more-or-less final form at Constantinople some fifty years later—bore the basic tripartite form of a baptismal creed—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—but with significant additions to clarify what the church meant by saying that the one Lord Jesus Christ is the only-begotten Son of God: he is God of God and Light of Light, of one essence with the Father, that is, with no difference as to the essence of his divinity from the Father. This echoed, in other terms, the Scriptures' own words, *ἐγὼ καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ἓν ἐσμεν* ("I and the Father are one, one 'thing'" [John 10:30]), but in language that engaged the terminology around which the controversy swirled—the *οὐσία*, the "essence," the "being," of God.

The first Nicene Creed—that of AD 325—also contained a coda: "But as for those who say, 'There was when he was not,' and that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence, or is subject to alteration or change—these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes."³ Thus did the first ecumenical creed—the first creed to be used by the entire church throughout the known world—put to use the characteristic biblical confession of rejecting falsehood. And what the creed means is this. To say "God of God and Light of Light" and "of one essence with the Father" is simultaneously to do two things: to repeat what the Scriptures themselves teach about Jesus, and to reject any other confession that claims the contrary.

In a moment I'm going to skip forward to 1530 and the beginning of the specifically Lutheran confessional movement. But for right now, let me remark that without any shame or sense of departure from Scripture, the church of subsequent ages simply accepted as settled, biblical teaching the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Council after council appealed to it as the basis of its own work in formulating confessions.

Now, one might be tempted to say that by the time we reach the Reformation, the authority of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was established as having stood the test of time and achieved wide acceptance in the church. While that certainly entered into the language of some of the councils—they regarded that creed as "ancient," and they revered the sheer number of martyr-bishops present for its

³ Translation is my own.

formulation and ratification—it's more correct to say that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed held sway precisely because it *ὁμολογέω*-ed. That is, it correctly reproduced biblical teaching. It faithfully "said back" what the Scriptures themselves taught. Though the creed itself cites no Scriptures, the extensive correspondence left us in the controversies leading up to the Nicene and Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creeds was appealed to in the councils and provides the scriptural testimony for the formulations they adopt. Age and ecumenical valence were secondary testimonies.

A second note worth making at this point is this. Just because the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was settled teaching of the church did not mean that the church shut the lights out. Instead, it propelled the church constantly back to the Scriptures, with the Bereans (Acts 17:10–15), to examine the Scriptures and see whether these things were true.

Confessions don't shut down theological and scriptural exploration; they open it up. In fact, any use of confessions to do otherwise is antithetical to their purpose. Peter's confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," invites the faithful into the mystery revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the One whom the Father sent into the flesh to redeem the world. The great catechetical teaching of the post-Nicene church likewise attests to the fact that the church always felt it incumbent upon itself to settle for itself ever anew the already settled teaching of the creed. Confessional shorthand thus paradoxically presents settled doctrine so that it might become settled again. Indeed, no confession that represents itself as reproducing Scripture can do otherwise; reexamination of the Scriptures authenticates the confession's postulates. The church built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets (Eph 2:20) is always a confessing church, and the confessing church must always be built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets.

It is this observation that underlays the impulse of the church reform that began in Wittenberg, Germany. The church is always saying something; that is, the church is always confessing something. But precisely because it purports to reproduce what God himself has said, it invites examination.

Now, here is no time to tell the story of the Lutheran Reformation. But what I want to do is draw attention to this point: like the scripturally faithful church of all times, the church reform that began in Wittenberg began by examining the Scriptures. It was to be built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself the cornerstone. And built on that foundation, it must confess. "For with the heart one believes and is justified; and with the mouth one confesses and is saved" (Rom 10:10).

Remarkably, the Augsburg Confession of 1530 begins with words that would have been familiar to anyone who had been present at church councils subsequent to Nicaea. "Our Churches, with common consent, do teach that the decree of the Council of Nicaea concerning the Unity of the Divine Essence and concerning the

Three Persons, is true and to be believed without any doubting” (AC I 1).⁴ In creedal Christianity this says nothing more than what the church always claimed of the Nicene Creed: that it correctly reproduces the teaching of the Scriptures. Here, the Augsburg Confession simply uses the creed as shorthand—not to forestall examination of the Scriptures, but to sum up what the Scriptures teach. For the purposes of the Augsburg Confession, nothing further is needed.

But unlike the earlier creedal tradition, when it comes to controverted articles the Augsburg Confession does something different, and this becomes a characteristic of the Lutheran confessional documents. It begins to engage in exegesis, to point to the scriptural warrant for its claims. Romans 3 and 4 are cited as evidence “that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight” (AC IV).⁵ The very Scriptures are thus brought into the confessions themselves as warrant that the Scriptures, in these very passages, teach what the confessions teach. When the Lutheran Confessions do this, they make evident what was latent in the early church’s confessions, namely, that they operate in that biblical mode of confession: they simply repeat what God himself has already said.

Coming just a year later, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession engages in this to an even greater extent, and in a manner redolent of the patristic exegetical correspondence over controverted teachings. Almost all of the article titled “Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law” constitutes an extended exegetical argument (Ap IV; older enumeration Ap IV [III or V]). Take, for example, Luke 7:47: “Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much.” This passage had been adduced by the adversaries to demonstrate, as the passage on its face seems to, that the forgiveness of my sins by God requires me first to love, in other words, that my forgiveness is conditioned on whether I love. If this exegetical conclusion is true, then the Lutheran confession of justification by faith alone is falsified since a true confession only always speaks back what God himself has said.

But the Apology goes on, in short order, to demonstrate that to conclude from this passage that I must first love in order to be forgiven is false. In its own words, “Christ interprets Himself [this very passage] when He adds: Your faith hath saved you. Christ, therefore, did not mean that the woman, by that work of love, had merited the remission of sins. For that is the reason he says: Your faith has saved you” (Ap IV 152; older enumeration Ap IV [III or V] 31).⁶ The expression “Her sins,

⁴ In *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, [ed. and trans. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 43.

⁵ In [Bente and Dau], *Triglot Concordia*, 45.

⁶ Translation adapted from [Bente and Dau], *Triglot Concordia*, 163.

which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much,” is thus, the Apology says, that manner of speaking whereby cause and effect are swapped (Ap IV 152; older enumeration Ap IV [III or V] 31). It would be like me saying to you, “You were really thirsty, because this bottle of water is empty.” The bottle of water is not the cause of you being thirsty, but the result, consequent evidence of your precedent thirst.

Here, and elsewhere in the Lutheran Confessions, the exegesis *is* the confession. But this is true of all confessions. Confession *is* exegesis, that is, a confession gives nothing more and nothing less than what the Scriptures say, and exegesis has the task of ascertaining what the Scriptures say. The Apostles’ Creed confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ was “born of the Virgin Mary” not despite the fact that in his birth Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled, “Behold, the Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son,” but precisely *because* in his birth Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled. It is no secret that those who deny that Isaiah 7:14 has anything to do with Christ’s virgin birth also deny “born of the Virgin Mary,” and that those who deny “born of the Virgin Mary” also deny Isaiah 7:14.

Now, this is not to say that there’s not much more to say about Christ’s virgin birth than what the Apostles’ Creed confesses. There is. Remember, creeds and confessions invite examination of the Scriptures. Orthodox commentators spend pages upon pages on Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23 and reach many conclusions. None, however, may be at odds with either the claim of the Apostles’ Creed or the exegetical conclusion that Jesus was born of the blessed Virgin. If they are at odds, they offend against the creed because they offend against the Scriptures themselves, and because of that latter they cease to be a true confession. That is, they cease to speak back accurately what God himself has said.

All of this has been a little apologia for the name of our seminary and the modus operandi of our seminary. Go ahead and do a Google search for “Faith Seminary,” “Grace Seminary.” They abound. “Faith,” “grace”—beautiful in the ears of a Lutheran. For by grace you have been saved through faith. But maybe the names of the seminaries don’t indicate too much. What are we to make of the fact that there’s a Calvinist seminary, a Baptist seminary, a nondenominational seminary, and a Catholic seminary all with the name of “Grace”? Is grace to a Baptist the same as grace to a Calvinist? And what hath Francis’ grace to do with Joel Osteen’s?

But our seminary is called “Concordia Theological Seminary”—that is, “Book of Concord Theological Seminary.” Our name itself is an assertion of the truth of the Lutheran Confessions of 1580, from the ancient creeds through the—relatively speaking—modern Formula of Concord. Our confessions rest on what the Scriptures say and give us to confess: that through them God has revealed himself, his will, and the salvation he worked through the blood of his Son Jesus Christ in words

that are clear and may thus be faithfully reproduced, so that with the heart one may believe and be justified and with the mouth one may confess and be saved.

So let us never tire of our confessions, of our Book of Concord, of our Concordia.

Instead, let us press into it. For the more we press into our Book of Concord, the more will we press into the Scriptures; and the more we press into the Scriptures, the more will we find in our confessions the deposit of the faith, the pattern of sound words.

Let's call that enough for today.

Once again, to every one of you honored guests, to all members of this seminary community, thank you for being here today. Keep our seminary—and me—in your prayers, and venture to support this work materially. Because here we teach the Book of Concord, the pattern of the sound words, the confession that accurately and boldly “says back” what the Lord himself has spoken in the Scriptures—and all of this for the life of the world in Jesus Christ, our dear Lord.

Jon S. Bruss

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An Opinion on the Ecclesiastical Use of the Title “Father”

This opinion is written in response to the request of the Kansas District of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (hereafter LCMS) as expressed in Resolution 25-01-05 of their 2025 Kansas District Convention, which included the following resolved statement:

Resolved, That the LCMS Kansas District refer this question to the exegetical faculties of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne to seek their opinions on the proper ecclesiastical use of the title “Father” within six (6) months of the June 2025 Kansas District Convention and report those opinions back to the District President who will then disseminate the information to the 2025 Kansas District Convention delegates.

It should be acknowledged, first of all, that neither the Scriptures nor the LCMS mandate that a particular title be used for the man who has been called to the Office of the Holy Ministry.¹ Even though this is true, it is helpful to begin any discussion

¹ Although various terms are used for this office (e.g., “pastoral office” or “Office of the Public Ministry”), this opinion will consistently use the term “Office of the Holy Ministry.” For broader examinations of the Office of the Holy Ministry in the Scriptures as taught and practiced in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, see the following publications: C. F. W. Walther, *The Church and The Office of The Ministry*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012); Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Ministry and Its Relation to the Christian Church* (March 1973); Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *The Ministry: Offices, Procedures*,

of the title(s) we choose to use in the LCMS for this office by looking at the Scriptures. They are the only source and norm for all doctrine and are to guide all our practices within the LCMS. So what do the Scriptures teach us about titles that were used for those in this office?

Titles in the New Testament for the Office of the Holy Ministry

A perusal of the New Testament Scriptures confirms that while there is clear testimony to this one divine Office of the Holy Ministry, there are several different titles used for those in this office.² These titles include “shepherd/pastor,” “apostle,” “prophet,” “evangelist,” “teacher,” “overseer/bishop,” and “elder.” The evidence for each of these titles will be briefly examined.

The understanding of YHWH as “the chief shepherd” in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps 23 and Ezek 34) who has under-shepherds who spiritually care for his people continues to be used in the New Testament with the language of Jesus as “the Noble/Good Shepherd (ὁ ποιμὴν ὁ καλός)” (John 10:11, 10:14) or “the Chief Shepherd (ὁ ἀρχιποιμὴν)” (1 Pet 5:4).³ The defining characteristic of Jesus’ shepherding in the Gospel of John is the unique priestly function that he lays down his self or person (ψυχή) on behalf of (ὑπέρ) the sheep (John 10:11, 10:15), even on behalf of the entire world (John 6:51). Not only is Jesus identified as YHWH “the Shepherd,” but Jesus also speaks of his apostles as spiritual “shepherds” or pastors. During his earthly ministry, he characterizes the Jews in Galilee and Judea as “sheep without a shepherd (ποιμένα)” (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34; cf. Num 27:17). Jesus then encourages his listeners to “pray earnestly to the Lord of the Harvest to send out workers (ἐργάτας) into his harvest” (Matt 9:38; Luke 10:2). That the referent of “workers” here in Matthew is “apostolic ministers” is clear from Matthew’s presentation a few verses later in his narrative of the fact that Jesus extended his ministry through calling, authorizing, and sending the “twelve disciples,” who are now designated in this Gospel to be also “twelve apostles” (Matt 10:1–2; see also Luke 6:13–16). They

and Nomenclature (September 1981); Joel P. Okamoto, “The Office of the Holy Ministry,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2006): 97–111; David P. Scaer, “The Office of the Ministry According to the Gospels and the Augsburg Confession,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2006): 113–121; and John C. Wohlrabe Jr., *Ministry in Missouri until 1962* (self-pub., 1992). For an examination of this office in the writings of Luther and Melancthon, see Hellmut Lieberg, *Office and Ordination in Luther and Melancthon*, trans. Matthew Carver (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020).

² The institution of the Office of the Holy Ministry is visible and recorded in the New Testament, especially in Jesus’ calling and sending of his apostles. Several texts could be cited for the calling (e.g., Matt 4:18–22, 9:9; Mark 1:16–20; Luke 5:1–11; and John 1:35–51), but especially John 20:21–22 and Matt 28:16–20 are cited for the sending of the apostles and institution of this office.

³ All Scripture translations not marked as ESV or NIV are the author’s own. Concerning Jesus as the Good Shepherd in the Gospel of John, including the translation “the Noble Shepherd,” see Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2008): 243–261, esp. 256–258.

remain among Jesus' many disciples, but these twelve disciples are also "apostles (ἀπόστολοι)" because they are now in the Office of the Holy Ministry. These apostles are to continue and extend Jesus' ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing (Matt 10:1–5; cf. Matt 4:23, 9:35).

There is, therefore, a clear connection and overlap between the "shepherd" and "apostle" titles as well as their functions. In Jesus' action of restoring Peter, he exhorts him as an apostolic *shepherd* to "feed my lambs (βόσκει τὰ ἀρνία μου)" (John 21:15), "shepherd my sheep (ποιμαίνει τὰ πρόβατά μου)" (John 21:16), "feed my sheep (βόσκει τὰ πρόβατά μου)" (John 21:17), and also "follow me (ἀκολούθει μοι)" (John 21:19). Jesus speaks this way because he is the chief shepherd who is sending forth his apostolic under-shepherd. This last imperative command, "follow me (ἀκολούθει μοι)," is the same command used for Peter's call into the apostolic ministry (Matt 4:19; Mark 1:17) as well as Matthew's call into that same ministry (Matt 9:9). The use of the title "Chief Shepherd (ὁ ἀρχιποιμήν)" in 1 Peter 5:4 implies that the "elders (πρεσβύτεροι)" mentioned in that immediate context are also shepherds/pastors, as will be discussed below.

Paul also affirms the understanding that "shepherd/pastor" is one of the titles used for the Office of the Holy Ministry when he writes in his letter to the Ephesians that Christ himself gave "shepherds/pastors" to his church: "And he himself gave . . . the shepherds/pastors (καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν . . . τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας)" (Eph 4:11). When Paul speaks to the elders/overseers from the church of Ephesus in Miletus, he uses shepherding imagery in his exhortation to them: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock (καὶ παντὶ τῷ ποιμνίῳ), in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (ἐπισκόπους), to shepherd (ποιμαίνειν) the church of God. . . . [F]ierce wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock (μὴ φειδόμενοι τοῦ ποιμνίου)" (Acts 20:28–29). The Latin term *pāstor*, used for a shepherd who leads those animals in his care to pasture, is the basis for the English noun "pastor." Although "pastor" was not a widespread title used for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry until the seventeenth century, it has become the most prominent title currently used in many Lutheran churches today, including the LCMS.⁴

The repeated and frequent stress on apostolic *Christology* in the Gospel of John (i.e., the Son is sent by the Father) is the important foundation for the climactic shift in John 20:21 to apostolic *ministry* (i.e., the apostles are sent by the Son). "Disciple (μαθητής)" is a revered and frequently used title for those who follow Jesus' teaching and life, including the "twelve disciples" (e.g., Matt 10:1–4; Luke 6:12–16). All of the dedicated followers of Jesus—whether men, women, or even children—were his disciples, but only a few of these "disciples" became "apostles" (literally "sent ones" who continue and extend Jesus' ministry; see Matt 10:2–4 and Luke 6:13–16). Because

⁴ Thomas M. Winger, *Ephesians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 456n135.

“apostle” was a title narrowly identified with male disciples who were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry and resurrection (see Acts 2:21–22), it is not a title that continued to be used in a widespread manner for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry after the first century.⁵

An important text that serves as testimony to Jesus moving beyond the twelve apostles to a larger number of workers in the apostolic ministry is Luke’s account of Jesus appointing the seventy-two and sending them out two by two (Luke 10:1–20).⁶ Although the twelve apostles were a unique group of disciples, the sending out of the seventy-two affirms that Jesus established an Office of the Holy Ministry from the beginning that would continue to grow in the future beyond the twelve and the seventy-two to other male disciples. Lutherans, therefore, have used the term “apostolic ministry” regularly and properly as another title for the Office of the Holy Ministry because that title stresses that the ministry is a continuation of the one office established in Jesus and instituted for the extension of his ministry in the church.⁷

Ephesians 4:11 testifies to various titles used for the Office of the Holy Ministry during the early decades of the Christian church: *Καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν τοὺς μὲν ἀποστόλους, τοὺς δὲ προφῆτας, τοὺς δὲ εὐαγγελιστάς, τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους*. On the basis of Paul’s testimony here that Christ gave the church “apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds/pastors, and teachers,” the offices of apostle and shepherd/pastor are sometimes understood as distinct and separate from the offices of prophet, evangelist, and teacher in the first-century church. This understanding is reflected in the English translations that render the verse, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11 NIV 1984). It is more accurate, however, to conclude that Paul is specifying here the individuals who Christ has given to the church: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (Eph 4:11 ESV).⁸ The syntax of “shepherds/pastors and teachers (τοὺς δὲ ποιμένας καὶ διδασκάλους)” also indicates that these two are not distinct offices.

⁵ The exception would be sectarian Christian groups that continue to use the title “apostle” for specific leaders to express their unique authority (cf. the ranking of “apostles” as “first” in 1 Cor 12:28).

⁶ Due to textual variants, there is some debate whether Jesus sent out seventy-two or seventy disciples; for discussion of this textual problem, see Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 9:51–24:53* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1997), 435–445. Because “seventy-two” is the harder reading due to the probability of some harmonization of this account with Moses choosing “seventy elders” (Num 11:16–17, 11:25; Exod 24:1, 24:9–14), the reading of “seventy-two” will be followed here.

⁷ This emphasis on “apostolic ministry” should not be understood as espousing the need for apostolic succession, which implies a particular lineage of ordination exclusively through the bishop in an unbroken chain, as argued in some churches. See Juhana Pohjola, “Some Remarks on Episcopacy from a Lutheran Perspective,” *Lutheran Theological Review* 37 (2025): 33–57, esp. 43–44.

⁸ On the translation issue, see Winger, *Ephesians*, 449–458. There are also challenges with modern translations of Eph 4:12; see Henry P. Hamann, “The Translation of Ephesians 4:12—A Necessary Revision,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (1988): 42–49, and Winger, *Ephesians*, 459.

Apostles, prophets, and teachers are also mentioned by Paul in a sort of descending rank within the Office of the Holy Ministry when addressing the problem of ecstatic speaking in tongues at Corinth: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers” (1 Cor 12:28). The phrase “God has appointed” affirms that these are all of the one divinely instituted Office of the Holy Ministry.

Although Thomas Winger understands that Paul is implying some distinction of offices with these five titles in Ephesians, he concludes with this important observation: “At the same time, the usage of the five terms in Eph 4:11 elsewhere in the NT demonstrates a certain overlap of categories; within the one divinely instated office of the ministry, certain men held only one, but others held many, of these offices.”⁹ This “overlap of categories” between apostle and shepherd/pastor, already discussed above, is also present here. Jesus is often addressed as “Teacher” or “Rabbi” by his disciples (e.g., Mark 9:5, 9:38, 10:17, 10:35, 10:51). Two of the primary tasks that characterize Jesus’ earthly ministry are teaching and preaching, as noted with the participles διδάσκων (“teaching”) and κηρύσσων (“proclaiming/preaching”) in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 4:23, 9:35). Thus, the apostles are also teachers who teach everything that Jesus taught (Matt 28:19). Jesus is also identified explicitly as “a prophet,” showing that his ministry has continuity with this established office in the history of Israel since Moses (e.g., Deut 18:15; John 6:14). In light of the longtime office of prophet among the Israelites for the man chosen by YHWH to proclaim the words that the prophet received from YHWH, one should not be surprised that Paul testifies that “prophet” is a title present in the first-century church for those who follow Jesus in proclaiming the word of God (Eph 4:11; 1 Cor 12:28).

The fact that the title “overseer (ἐπίσκοπος)” is closely related to the titles “shepherd” and “elder” is visible especially in Acts 20:28, where Paul calls from Ephesus “the elders of the churches (τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἐκκλησίας)” (Acts 20:17) in order to exhort them about shepherding as the key function of being an overseer: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (ἐπισκόπους), to shepherd (ποιμαίνειν) the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The close relationship and overlap between the offices of “overseer” and “elder” in the congregations established by Paul and his associates is visible in the similar qualifications given by Paul in his pastoral epistles for “overseers” (1 Tim 3:1–7) and for “elders” (Titus 1:5–9). The titles are so closely related that Paul begins in Titus 1:5 with the title “elder (πρεσβύτερος)” and then switches to the title “overseer (ἐπίσκοπος)” in Titus 1:7. Although “overseer” may have been a title for one holding the Office of the Holy Ministry for whom there were more responsibilities than those holding the title of “elder,” both should be understood as titles for those who hold the Office of the Holy Ministry. Therefore, an elder is an overseer who is also described here as “God’s steward (θεοῦ

⁹ Winger, *Ephesians*, 458.

οἰκονόμος),” a descriptive term used elsewhere by Paul for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry (“stewards [οἰκονόμους] of the mysteries of God” in 1 Cor 4:1). The title ἐπίσκοπος (“overseer”) is sometimes translated as “bishop” and used by some denominations for pastors who have oversight authority within that denomination. The understanding of ἐπίσκοπος as an office distinct and higher than the Office of the Holy Ministry, however, is not present in the New Testament.¹⁰

Because “elder (πρεσβύτερος)” is a term widely used in many Christian congregations today for an elected office held by laity who work closely with the pastor in the spiritual care of a congregation, its presence in the New Testament as a title for the Office of the Holy Ministry can be a source of some confusion. The close inter-relationship and interchangeability of the titles “elder,” “apostle,” “shepherd,” and “overseer” is most clearly presented in 1 Peter 5:1–5. There the *Apostle* Peter clearly understands himself to be an *elder* when he writes, “I exhort the elders (πρεσβυτέρους) among you as a *fellow elder* (συμπρεσβύτερος)” (1 Pet 5:1, emphasis added). He then exhorts these elders to “shepherd (ποιμάνατε) the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight (ἐπισκοποῦντες) . . . being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2–3). The use of the participle ἐπισκοποῦντες (“exercising oversight”) in this text demonstrates the close relationship between and overlap of an overseer and an elder in the understanding of the Apostle Peter and the first-century Christians to whom he is writing. Both “overseers” and “elders” were holders of the Office of the Holy Ministry who shepherd the flock.

Although there are good reasons not to use some titles found in the New Testament for the Office of the Holy Ministry in an LCMS congregation because they would be inaccurate or confusing titles (e.g., “apostle,” “elder,” or “bishop”), the evidence presented above demonstrates significant testimony to “shepherd/pastor” as a title used for Jesus and those he sent into this office in earliest Christianity.

Terms Not Used in the New Testament as Titles for the Office of the Holy Ministry

There are a few terms used in the New Testament that are related to the Office of the Holy Ministry but are not used as specific titles for this office in these Scriptures. These terms include “slave,” “servant/minister,” “steward,” “father,” “reverend,” and “priest.” The Apostle Paul refers to himself as a “slave (δοῦλος)” or a “servant/minister (διάκονος)” in his epistles (e.g., Gal 1:10; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 3:5), but he is using neither term as a title for his office as apostle. These terms function as descriptors of his life in the office of apostle; they are simply descriptive of his life of

¹⁰ For a discussion during the Reformation about the authority of bishops/overseers by divine right versus human right, see the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII. The Reformers clearly viewed this office, when properly exercised, as within the Office of the Holy Ministry, not distinct from it.

service. Every apostle and pastor is to be a slave and servant/minister of Jesus. By using the term “servant/minister (διάκονος)” of himself in 1 Corinthians 3:5, Paul is not implying that he is in both the office of apostle and the office of deacon.¹¹ Similarly, Paul describes those in the Office of the Holy Ministry as ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ (“ministers/assistants of Christ”) in 1 Corinthians 4:1. Because “minister” is a title in English used in the LCMS both for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry and for those in auxiliary offices, it must be carefully defined when used.¹² It is important to clarify what kind of “minister/servant” one is in the church. It appears that “steward (οἰκονόμος)” is used by Paul as a description of what holders of the Office of the Holy Ministry do rather than an additional title for who they are (1 Cor 4:1; Titus 1:7). Although there are New Testament texts about the importance of respecting those with spiritual authority over others (e.g., 1 Thess 5:12), the title “reverend” is not in the New Testament.

While Paul refers to himself as a spiritual “father (πατήρ)” in 1 Corinthians 4:15b, it does not appear that he or other New Testament writers used “father” as a title for the Office of the Holy Ministry.¹³ Matthew 23:9 has been cited by some as the biblical basis for not using “father” as a title for someone in the Office of the Holy Ministry: “And call no one father (πατέρα) on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven (ὁ πατὴρ ὁ οὐράνιος).” Jesus is, however, using hyperbole here to

¹¹ 1 Tim 3:1–13 implies a clear distinction between the offices of overseer and deacon. While there are some qualifications that are shared by both offices (e.g., both are to be “husband of one wife”), three distinct qualifications for an overseer are expressed here. First, an overseer must be “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2), but this skill is not listed as essential for a deacon. Second, an overseer “must be above reproach” (1 Tim 3:2), but this high standard is not repeated for a deacon. Third, an overseer “must not be a recent convert” (1 Tim 3:6), which is another characteristic that is not repeated in the qualifications of a deacon. The standards specified for an overseer are higher than those stated for a deacon. This is biblical evidence that deacon was understood to be an office related to, but distinct from, the Office of the Holy Ministry. The mention of the office of deacon in 1 Tim 3:8–13 and Phil 1:1 indicates that it was probably an office established by the apostles in the early decades of the Christian church to assist those in the Office of the Holy Ministry. It should not be concluded, however, that the seven mentioned in Acts 6:1–6 were in the office of deacon even though the verb διακονέω is used there (Acts 6:2). The actions of both Stephen (Acts 6:8–7:60) and Philip (Acts 8:4–8, 8:26–40) in preaching/teaching and baptizing indicate that the two men probably held the Office of the Holy Ministry.

¹² Within the LCMS, the terms “ordained minister” and “commissioned minister” are used to distinguish between those in the Office of the Holy Ministry and those in auxiliary offices; see constitution article V.B in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Handbook 2023* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023). An example of the confusion that use of the term “minister” without clear definition can cause is seen in Oscar E. Feucht, *Everyone a Minister: A Guide to Churchmanship For Laity and Clergy* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974). The natural question arises: If only some are called to be ordained ministers, and some others are called to be commissioned ministers, then how can *everyone* be a minister? Because of the technical use of “minister” for specific offices in the church, “servant” is a better translation to use as a label for every Christian (i.e., everyone is a servant).

¹³ It does appear that both Stephen and Paul use “fathers” as a title for Jewish teachers (see Acts 7:2, 22:1).

emphasize that no earthly father (biological or spiritual) is to be more prominent in the life of his followers than our heavenly Father. Jesus is certainly not going against the Fourth Commandment by advocating that no person in the authoritative position of father should ever be addressed as “father.”¹⁴

With regard to the title “priest,” each baptized Christian is understood to have the status of a “priest (ἱερεὺς)” in some texts (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6) and Jesus is our “high priest (ἀρχιερεὺς)” (e.g., Heb 4:14). “Priest” is also a term with a long history of usage in the church for the Office of the Holy Ministry. Yet “priest” is not used as a title for those in the Office of the Holy Ministry in the New Testament in spite of those in this office clearly having some priestly roles (i.e., service at the altar by offering prayers and administering the Lord’s Supper).

Use of the Title “Father” for Those in the Office of the Holy Ministry in the LCMS

Why are some LCMS pastors using the title “father”? For a few, it may already be a well-established tradition in the congregation to which they have been called. For others who use it as a title, it may be a desire to emphasize their role as the spiritual father of the members under their care. In the Large Catechism, Martin Luther includes “spiritual father” with his discussion of the three primary kinds of fathers:

Thus we have three kinds of fathers presented in this commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of a nation. Besides these, there are also spiritual fathers—not like those in the papacy who applied this title to themselves but performed no fatherly office. For the name spiritual father belongs only to those who govern and guide us by the Word of God. St. Paul boasts that he is a father in I Cor. 4:15, where he says, “I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” Since such persons are fathers, they are entitled to honor, even above all others.¹⁵ (LC I 158–160)

Those in the Office of the Holy Ministry do indeed serve as spiritual fathers. They offer fatherly comfort, guidance, and discipline from the Scriptures to the spiritual families under their care. In a world where there is confusion about human fatherhood, God as Father, and the biblical mandate that only men are to be called and ordained, those in the Office of the Holy Ministry seek to model what a true father is.

So what about the use of the title “father” for those holding the Office of the Holy Ministry in the LCMS? Although it is a title widely used in some

¹⁴ For example, the Apostle John addresses those to whom he is writing as “little children,” “fathers,” “young men,” and “children” in 1 John 2:12–14. Note also that if Christ’s intent was to proscribe the title “father” per se, this would preclude calling even biological fathers by that name.

¹⁵ Trans. Robert H. Fischer, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 387.

denominations,¹⁶ neither is it found as a title for the office in the New Testament nor has it been a title widely used in the LCMS, past or present. As noted above, because the New Testament has a variety of titles for the office and other terms closely related to the office, it cannot be argued from the Scriptures that those in this office or a particular congregation can insist that the title “father” be used as the title for the man in the Office of the Holy Ministry, nor can it be argued from the Scriptures that it can never be used as a title for the man in this office. It is neither commanded nor forbidden (i.e., an adiaphoron).

There are two good questions to ask when considering the use of this title in the LCMS. First, will the use of this title accomplish a noble outcome (that the pastor be understood as a spiritual father of his flock)? Second, will the use of this title cause confusion for some members and discord with some brother pastors? While freedom certainly exists regarding the use of titles for this office, this does not mean we should exercise that freedom in every circumstance. In the LCMS, “pastor” is the title widely used for this office, though it cannot be mandated. And so we speak for the title “pastor” not as a rule or law but as a good and wise custom, recognizing that we are called to be unified in the common confession that underlies our common calling.

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¹⁶ Although the early church referred to some bishops as “church fathers,” the prominent use of “father” as a clerical title for all priests has taken place in the past few centuries in some denominations (especially Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican).