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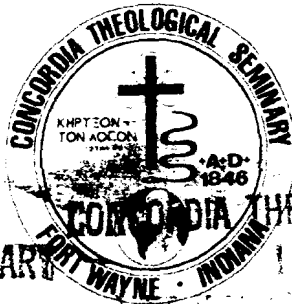
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God's Ministers, Their Calls, and Their Relationship To Each Other

Vernon H. Harley

The Lutheran Confessions identify the ministry of the Word with the Office of the Keys and call it "a power given by Christ to the Church for binding and loosing sin."¹ They also remind us that this office was not given to Peter alone, nor the apostles as apostles, not to them as holders of a special ministerial class, but to the Church, to Christians who as believers have received the Holy Ghost.² It is of this ministry of the Word given to all believers that the Apology says: "Of all acts of worship that is the greatest, most holy, most necessary, and highest, which God has required as the highest in the First and Second Commandment, namely, to preach the Word of God. For the ministry is the highest office in the Church. Now if this worship is omitted, how can there be knowledge of God, the doctrine of Christ, or the Gospel?"³ In speaking of the highest office in the Church, the Apology is not distinguishing between the ministry as carried out by the priesthood of all believers and by publicly called servants; rather, it is contrasting the ministry of the Word with other forms of worship, particularly with such offices and orders of worship set up by men but which are only indirectly connected with preaching the Gospel. These latter ministries are called "church polity and grades," "ecclesiastical orders," and "human traditions," while the "ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments" is termed "the highest office."⁴

Our Confessions speak in this way because the Scriptures do. The apostles, for example, distinguish between "the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4) and serving tables and definitely consider the ministry of the Word the highest office. Ephesians 4:11f. and 1 Corinthians 12:28f. list various other ministries, not of the Word itself but auxiliary to it (e.g., caring for bodily wants), all gifts to the Church.

The Public Ministry

In this treatise we are concerned primarily with the *public* exercise of these offices, namely, how they are carried out by called servants in behalf of others (*von Gemeinschaftswegen*). Here it is essential to understand that the public ministry of the Word is never optional. It is a divine institution. This is not so with the public exercise of other ministries which we call auxiliary offices.

The public ministry of the Word embraces various forms or branches, such as apostles, preachers, evangelists, pastors, and professors. The original apostolic office embraced all of these; however, to none of the other branches has been given the exercise of the entire ministry of the Word or the Office of the Keys. Each person's function is determined by his specific calling (Eph. 4:10-13 and 1 Cor. 12:28f). Associated with the various divisions within the public ministry of the Word are usually other forms of ministry which may appear to be part and parcel of the "highest office," but which in reality are merely auxiliary offices (Hilfsaemter).

In his *Kirche und Amt* Dr. C. F. W. Walther makes these points among others: The holy ministry (or pastoral office as he calls it) is distinct from the priestly office of all believers; it is not humanly or arbitrarily, but divinely commanded and established; it is not set up above Christians, but is an office of service; its authority is spiritual and limited to preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments; it is conferred by God through the congregation as holder of ecclesiastical power by means of the call; it is a public office through which common rights of the spiritual priesthood are administered in behalf of all; this ministry is the highest office in the Church from which, as its stem, all other offices in the Church arise.⁵

Some misunderstanding, however, seems to have arisen among Missouri Synod Lutherans to the effect that the parish pastorate has been identified with the total ministry of the Word, a position which is alleged to be Walther's. Some therefore have concluded that the pastor's office within a congregation is the only divinely appointed office and that the pastor, so understood, alone has supervision by divine right over all other offices in the Church. According to this view, all authority of the ministry stems from the local congregation, which is held to be the only divinely instituted entity in the Church. All workers called by synods, districts, and boards have their office only by delegation of authority from the local congregations.⁶ Some even hold that such workers, including professors of theology, unless called by a specific congregation, have no divine calls.

This position is usually supported with passages like Acts 20:28, Titus 1:5, and Matthew 18:17. But when we look at these passages, it is quite obvious that the conclusions drawn are faulty. We note that in the two first passages, as also in Philippians 1:1, the terms "elders" (*presbyterous*) and "overseers" (*episcopous*) are plural while "church" is singular. No one individual is overseer alone, or over other co-workers, but together they oversee and feed the flock of God. The same is true in the Titus passage.

None of these passages insists that one pastor must oversee the whole congregation. There may have been one congregation at each place with various elders, or various congregations with one or more elders. The point being made is that the whole flock should be properly cared for, not that one man must be overseer. The various terms — minister, elder, shepherd, overseer — are used interchangeably in the New Testament for those who feed God's flock and labor in word and doctrine. It is noteworthy also that in Ephesians 4:11 pastors and teachers are grouped together in fourth place after apostles, prophets and evangelists. Also in passages like 2 Timothy 1:11, Matthew 28:19, 2 Timothy 2:24, 1 Timothy 3:2, teaching is considered part of the ministry of the Word.

Some of the misunderstanding may come from Dr. Walther's use of the terms *Predigtamt* and *Pfarramt* in a wider sense for the total ministry of the Word, when we usually understand them to apply to the more narrowly defined pastoral office; misunderstanding may also be due to the fact that *Gemeinde* can be rendered either *Church* or *Congregation* in English. But Dr. Walther should not be interpreted against himself. Under Thesis VIII he writes:

Since incumbents of the public ministry have in their public office, for the sake of the common interests of their congregations, John 20:21-23, the administration of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, which the Church possesses originally and immediately, Matt. 16:19, 18:18, their office must necessarily be the highest office in the Church, and from it, as from the stem, all other offices must issue, inasmuch as the keys embrace the entire authority of the Church.⁷

In this same section Walther later distinguishes between those whom Scriptures call elders, bishops, rulers, stewards, and those who "do not labor in the Word and doctrine" and he identifies some of these latter as rulers, deacons, and administrators.⁸ He also mentions teachers, almoners, percentors, and calls them "aids to the ministry of preaching." Since teachers in our parochial schools do labor part of the time in Word and doctrine, it is only fair to understand Walther as thinking of that part of the teacher's office which has to do with teaching so-called secular subjects as "auxiliary."

In *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher* Dr. Arnold C. Mueller shows quite conclusively that the position many attribute to Walther and have called the Missouri position is not actually Walther's. This writer believes Mueller is correct and that Walther would agree essentially with Mueller as he presents a diagram of the ministry in the form of a tree. The roots make up

the priesthood of all believers from which the whole ministry grows. The trunk divides into three large branches designated *Parish, Synod and District, and Other Individual and Cooperative Ventures*, each with its own ramification of called and contracted workers.⁹ Mueller's illustration, however, lacks Walther's distinction between the actual ministry of the Word and auxiliary offices supportive of, but not essentially part of, the ministry of the Word. Walther seems to hold that auxiliary offices are part of Christian ministry *only in as much* as they are supportive of and connected with the Word. Otherwise they are purely secular and belong in the area of civil righteousness which even an unbeliever can perform. However, when done among Christians, motivated by and in support of the Word, they become auxiliary offices even though they are not essentially an exercise of the Office of the Keys.

We believe this distinction is essential since teaching of the Word on behalf of the Church is divinely instituted. There is, however, no divine mandate to carry out any auxiliary functions as a *public ministry*. Any such auxiliary ministry is a matter of Christian privilege and belongs among the "ordinances of men" which have no specific divine precept, but which, nevertheless, have divine approval when established and agreed upon among Christians (1 Pet. 2:13; Matt. 18:19-20). Unless this distinction is made, every individual responsibility would immediately become joint responsibility of the Church to be exercised in some form of public ministry. Thus, we must differ from Dr. Mueller's idea that the teaching of secular subjects by the parochial school teacher is conducted on the same basis as his teaching of the Word of God.¹⁰ We do not question, of course, the divine right of those appointed to these auxiliary offices to fulfil their duties any more than we would the divine right of government officials to rule once they have been elected. With Walther we would hold that those offices filled by Christians in support of the Word are Christian vocations.

This truth does not mean that Lutherans should abolish all distinctions between the sacred and the secular, nor that their public ministers should speak out on every secular issue, as writers like Harvey Cox advocate.¹¹ Ordinarily public servants of the Church have no authorization or call to speak and act in behalf of the church in civil affairs. The Augsburg Confession gives the Lutheran position: "Of Ecclesiastical Order they teach that no one should teach publicly or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called."¹² While this statement refers specifically to the ministry of the Word, it also indicates that a public servant of the Church should act in behalf of the church only when authorized

to do so. Do public servants of the Church, then, ever have a call to function as ministers in social and political affairs? To answer this question Lutherans would have to distinguish with the Augustana between the "power of the Church and the power of the sword," both being of divine right, but not to be confused with each other, each to remain in its own realm.¹³ Therefore the only authority which the Church *as Church* can confer upon its ministers is the Office of the Keys. Any other power or authority is not really ecclesiastical power, but is derived from other sources and follows other lines of authority.

Auxiliary Offices and Calls

We should recognize the fact, however, that seldom is anyone called exclusively to the ministry of the Word. Calls, even to be pastor, usually include obligations of the nature of those which Dr. Walther calls *Hilfsaemter*, that is, auxiliary functions (see Acts 6: 1f. & Rom. 12: 6f.). These, too, are the business of the church in as much as they are necessary for the orderly conduct of worship and extension of the Kingdom. But when Christians decide to confer administrative, musical, or other auxiliary responsibilities upon their pastors and other servants of the Word, they do so *not by divine command* but by privilege with the assurance of God's blessing.

Some assume that the terms "overseer," "bishop," and "elder" apply only to the parish pastor and that he therefore has the responsibility to oversee all other offices in the church. This simply is not so. Those terms describe the relationship of the ministers of the Word to the flock, not to each other. Rank among workers can quickly become a problem if this is not understood and if responsibilities are not clearly defined when the workers are called. Problems of this nature sometimes arise when congregations begin to work together, forming synods, calling professors, missionaries, editors, and officers. How do these relate to each other? Do they have divine calls? Or can all such offices in the church be dispensed with as long as the "pastorate" is maintained in the local congregation?

The New Testament certainly leaves no doubt about this matter. It presents our Lord training apostles, and giving prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, to the church (Eph. 4: 11f). It allows for new offices to be established as needs arise (Acts 6) and has the Lord providing gifts to the church for the benefit of all (1 Cor. 12), but expecting these gifts to be used for the edification of all in decency and order (1 Cor. 14). When new offices are established in the church, obviously the needs, the gifts supplied by the Lord, and the welfare of the "whole flock" are to be taken into consideration. All that is "wanting" is to be

supplied; but the church is at liberty to organize and distribute responsibilities, services, and manpower as God opens doors and provides the gifts to fill the needs. All, of course, is to be done by common agreement (Matt. 18:18-20, 1 Tim. 5:16). Essentially, the call is an authorization by the Church, through common agreement, to have a certain individual function in a specified capacity on its behalf.

The Form of the Church

But what about ministries established by church groups other than local congregations? Some appeal to Matthew 18:17 to prove that the local congregation is the only divinely ordained form of the church with the right to exercise the Office of the Keys and hence to call servants of the Word. Matthew 18, however, says nothing about the *form* in which believers must organize to do their work. It does make plain that where even two or three believers are gathered together in Christ's Name, He is among them. Their authority to function as Church does not rest upon some *form of organization* but in the Word itself. Even what we ordinarily call excommunication is here made the responsibility of the individual Christian ("Let him be unto *thee* . . ."). No functioning form — and that includes the congregation — is here given the right to become autonomous with no obligations other than to establish the ministry among and for itself. Matthew 18 gives Christians the right to agree upon what basis they can best organize as long as Christ's will as expressed in His Great Commission is kept in mind. We are to remember that the "Lord added daily to *the Church* such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47). The Bible does not say: The Lord added to a specific functioning form such as should be saved.

The right and duty to function beyond the limits of the local congregation are inherent in the priesthood of all believers. God's believers are His Church functioning, not merely when they do so on a congregational level, but also when they function in the name of the Lord to do His work on a wider level, as in synods. Our Confessions are in agreement with this position. The Smalcald Articles clearly recognize that "the decisions of Synods are the decisions of the Church"¹⁴ and that the "Church is to retain the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers." No human power can wrest this right from the Church.¹⁵ That truth would apply also to any local congregation that began to assume dictatorial authority to its particular organizational form; for the Office of the Keys does not belong to any *form* of the functioning Church as such, but to the priesthood of all believers. The Altenberg Debate in which Dr. Walther was involved with Dr. Marbach

* Context above to explain it better

clearly shows this to be Walther's position. He did not argue that *only* a local congregation has the right to exercise the Office of the Keys, but that *even* this body of Christians separated from the Established Church of Germany also had this right.¹⁶

Conclusions

A number of conclusions need to and can be drawn from the above observation:

1) The divinity of the call is not determined by a particular form of the functioning church, but by the proper agreement between the calling group and the ones called. Where such agreement exists between God's people, a call, whether from a local congregation, a synod, a board, or even a conference for the duration of the conference, has the ingredients of a divine call.

2) Each particular functioning form of the church ought to respect agreements made with other functioning forms and not interfere with matters of the other. Synod does not call pastors for the respective congregations; neither does any *one* congregation call professors, executives, or district presidents for the whole church body. Each form exists to carry out responsibilities which the priesthood of believers has agreed to perform on that level, never to usurp authority over believers as a power unto itself. When St. Paul writes, "All things are yours" (1 Cor. 3:22), this implies that Christians have also the right to establish those forms that best suit them for carrying out Christ's Great Commission as long as this is done with proper regard to previous agreements with other Christians and in accord with Scriptural injunctions such as 1 Timothy 2:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35.

3) Ministers of Christ ought to know by what authority they function. The only authority a minister of the Word — whether pastor, theological professor, or president of a synod — has *per se* is that of the Word (Heb. 13:17; 1 Thess. 5:12). When other lines of authority are established in the organizational church, they are part of this *world's order*, not of the Kingdom of Grace, as Jesus makes plain in Mark 10:12ff. Ministers of the Word are not lords over each other, nor over God's heritage (1 Peter 5:1-4). Servants of the Word ought not appeal to this world's order (e.g., rank of office) when calling for obedience to the Word.

4) Where various ministries are involved, calls by necessity are limited; and the extent of service is determined by the call. Together the called servants are to feed the whole flock, each respecting the other's call, not becoming a busybody in other men's affairs.

5) Ordination could theoretically be administered to all church-workers. But since the common understanding of the term makes

ordination the stamp of recognition which a church body places upon those certified to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, such a practice would lead to confusion.

6) Synodical officials have their positions from the synod's entire constituency, not merely from congregations of a particular district, even less from a single congregation. By the same token, no congregation is a completely independent unit. When an individual or congregation severs relations from a church body for reasons other than doctrinal error or ungodly practice, this is serious separatism. By becoming partakers of the Gospel we are brought into fellowship with other Christians, and it is the Christian's responsibility to recognize and practice such fellowship in as far as this is feasible, except for the above-mentioned reasons.

7) The common understanding of the congregational bond is that regular preaching and teaching of the Word and administration of the Sacraments is to take place at the congregational level. When these things take place at *ad hoc* gatherings (e.g., conventions, conferences, youth gatherings, etc.), it would appear that they occur by common consent of those involved, but should not be done in disregard of the primary relationships which we have in local congregations. Since district and synodical officers hold their positions by the call or consent of a larger body of Christians, it would appear totally out of place for an individual congregation to issue such persons another call just in order to keep that man on the clergy roster of Synod. The practice of referring disciplinary matters to a congregation for disposition instead of dealing with them on the level on which they arise appears to be not only frustrating but based upon a faulty understanding of the nature of the Church.

In conclusion, all ministers of the Word are to be reminded of the example of their Master who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and give His life as a ransom for many. Through their ministry He is gathering and sustaining His flock. In due time He will appear and they will receive their reward — a crown of glory that fades not away (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Footnotes

1. The Smalcald Articles, VII; *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 493. Unless otherwise noted all references to the Lutheran Confessions are from this edition.
2. S.A., Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, p. 511.
3. Apology, XV, p. 327.
4. *Ibid.*, XIII, p. 311.
5. William Dallman, W.H.T. Dau, and Th. Engelder, *Walther and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), p. 71f.
6. "Report of the Interim Committee," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXII, 2, p. 1f.

7. *Walther and the Church*, p. 78f.
8. *Ibid.* p. 79.
9. Arnold C. Mueller, *The Ministry of the Lutheran Teacher* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 78-79.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 129-130.
11. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 246.
12. A.C., XIV, p. 49; Ap., XIV, p. 315.
13. A.C., XXVIII, pp. 84-85.
14. S.A. Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope, p. 521.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 523. Note: In discussing Matthew 18, Dr. Walther says; "No proof is needed to show that the Lord in this passage is speaking of a visible, particular, local church. However, when immediately after these words the Lord proceeds thus: 'Verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,' v. 18, He manifestly delegates with these words *also to each* visible local church the keys of the kingdom of heaven, or that church power which, in Peter, He had given to His entire holy Church in Matt. 16:19" (*Walther and the Church*, p. 64; italics supplied). What Walther says needs no proof is precisely what many feel is not at all stated in the text. But even so, Walther does not deny that synods and other functioning forms of the church have the authority to call and exercise the Office of the Keys. He is arguing that the local congregation, regardless of how small, also has this power given to the "entire holy church."
16. Walter O. Forster, *Zion on the Mississippi* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), pp. 524-525.

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