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Authority in the Church: A Lutheran Perspective

Eugene F. Klug

This essay was first presented at the second meeting of Series II (1985-1987) of the Lutheran-Methodist Dialogue.¹ Discussion in this series revolved around each church body's teaching and practice concerning *episcopus* (oversight) and *episcopos* (overseer, bishop, pastor) in the churches. The author of this particular contribution to the discussion attempted to present Walther's (and first of all Luther's) exposition of Scripture's teaching on the subject, which has, of course, a continuing relevance to the life of the church.

The church most simply defined "is holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (Smalcald Articles, III, xii). Luther was right on target with the Scriptures with this totally artless, ingenuous explication of the church's boundaries, the faithful fold of believers, among whom there can be no pseudo-sheep. The chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, knows without fail who are His (John 10:27-29; 11:51-52; 15:6; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23-27; 1 John 2:19). In his famous treatise of 1539, *On the Councils and the Church*, Luther thumps home the point that this is a truth that even a seven-year-old child knows.

Thus the true nature of the church has to do with people. Christ is the church's only Head and Sovereign. By its very nature the church is a spiritual community traversing all time and place. No secular relationship (family, race, or nation), nor mere external connection, nor fellowship around given rites or external objects, but personal faith alone makes people members of Christ, and thus of Christ's mystical body and church.

What Christians confess in the creed, "Credo . . . unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam," is true in every point because of what has been done for His church by Christ. It is one, numerically, and in unity of faith and hope; it is holy through the perfect, imputed righteousness of Christ; it is catholic because it embraces all believers; it is apostolic because it is built on apostolic teaching.

To the church belong all the powers and privileges which Christ, the Bridegroom, has given to His beloved, the church. The church is the royal priesthood of which Scripture speaks. To it all rights, privileges, and responsibilities belong which Christ has bestowed

upon this sovereign body. These are the church's treasures. No hierarchy, certainly no individual, no church body as such, no synod, mediates between the royal priests and Christ. Christian believers come boldly into His presence with complete confidence in His mercy, with all their petitions and all their spiritual sacrifices. The keys of Christ's kingdom, word and sacraments, are the possession of this royal priesthood to use and proclaim. They are not vested in a special order of "priests," of clergy, of church bodies, of popes, bishops, or the like.

Christ builds His church. He does so with His word, by the gospel of forgiveness through His atoning sacrifice which is to be proclaimed in all the world for sinners' sakes. Thus the word, along with baptism and the Lord's Supper, becomes the mark of the church's presence upon earth. It is never preached in vain, but by His promise will accomplish the purpose for which He sent it. The gatherings of believers that cluster around the word are, therefore, not accidental. It is the Lord's will that congregations, called churches appropriately in the New Testament because of the believers present there, assemble all those who profess faith in Christ for worship, for prayer, for instruction, for godly discipline, for fellowship at the Lord's Supper.

Such local churches exist by divine will. To them the keys belong. The relation of such local churches with the *una sancta*, the holy Christian church of all believers, is co-extensive as regards membership. Christ does not have two churches, although it is appropriate to speak of the invisible nature of the universal church at the same time that one speaks of the visible Christian church on earth. Thus there are not two charters. With whatever powers and privileges Christ has endowed the *una sancta*, He has vested the local congregation in fullest measure.

The ministry of the word, therefore, belongs not first of all to a special class, but to all believers. Every Christian congregation has this responsibility from its Lord. Included in these powers and duties is the need to call a qualified pastor. This is God's will, and ministry in the narrow sense, referring to the public pastoral office, exists *jure divino*, by God's institution. The pastor comes into his office by the call of the congregation, through which by Christ's

command the powers of office are delegated. Thus, congregation and pastor exist in correlative relationship, the pastor performing publicly the things which belong to all the royal priests.

Luther saw no conflict between these two articles, the sovereignty of the royal priesthood and the God-ordained pastoral office. They formed a very wonderful ellipse which Christ Himself had set up for His church, like two poles around which the life of the church moves in God-intended symmetry and function.

Associations or groupings of congregations into larger bodies may be shown to be a godly and beneficial arrangement. In fact, the paradigm of the New Testament points the way towards the cultivating of a wider fellowship of sister churches, banded together for mutual strengthening and joint church work. The Scriptures, however, are silent on the form that such bodies should take and, first of all, whether they should be considered as commanded by God. Useful purpose though they serve, there is no ground whatsoever to the claim that God requires them, nor to any pretension that apostolicity has been given to any person or any set of persons to rule or govern over such bodies, as in the so-called historic episcopate.

True it is that the unity of the church universal, the *una sancta*, ought to have its counterpart in the visible Christian church in this world. Division and schism in the latter is certainly contrary to God's will, as is also the vaunted pluralism of Christian bodies. These splits surely pain all Christians. They strive and pray that these disruptions be overcome. But fellowship in the faith finally rests upon true unity in belief. Such a bond results only from fidelity to Christ's word, hardly from fabricated ecclesial structures that are built upon minimal formulas of union. Unity in Christ's church is the presupposition, not the goal, of ecumenical endeavor.

Fundamental to Lutheran theology, therefore, is the recognition that the church in this world cannot create anything to enhance the nature of Christ's church, which He creates whole and perfect. Synods of congregations may be formed, but they do not *ipso facto* advance Christ's kingdom. They are voluntary organizations which exist *jure humano* and must always be seen as such. They are

representative churches, which bear the name "church" in a representative fashion, by virtue of certain powers or functions delegated to them by the member congregations. They exercise no overlordship over and above the congregations, but are super-ordinated only to the extent that given functions have been delegated to them by the congregations which they represent. The churchly work which they do belongs first of all and fundamentally to the congregations which they serve. Together the congregations, through the instrumentality of such synods, cooperate in the church's work, not least the preparation of qualified men for the public ministry; but the individual congregation's sovereignty in all of this cooperation remains intact.

Synods thus have advisory powers only, not legislative, as far as the internal affairs of congregations go. At the same time, each congregation, as a member of the *ecclesia representativa* or *concordita*, values the fellowship and unity which it has within the synodical body, cooperates fully in the joint mission, and fosters the fraternal spirit, joined in the proclamation of the gospel with kindred minds. The congregation does not derive its powers from a super-church, by whatever name it is called, but from Christ, who bestows the keys of the kingdom upon every community of believers.

It was in America, under the guarantee of the First Amendment, that Lutheran congregations for the first time had the freedom to establish, or set in operation, principles which Luther articulated at the time of the Reformation in opposition to Rome's hierarchical conception of the church and the ministry. Now for the first time the individual churches, or congregations, were free from governmental and consistorial domination in religious matters. It was especially C. F. W. Walther, pressed by controversy over these very issues in his own circles and guided by intense study of Scripture and Luther's writings, who was able to throw off the old state-church yoke and articulate clearly the fundamental principles that characterize Lutheran thinking and practice on church and ministry.² The constitution of the church body which Walther helped to found carefully delimited the synod's authority:

In its relation to its members the Synod is not an ecclesiastical government exercising legislative or coercive powers,

and with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government it is but an advisory body. Accordingly, no resolution of the Synod imposing anything upon the individual congregation is of binding force if it is not in accordance with the Word of God or if it appears to be inexpedient [*ungeeignet* in the original] as far as the condition of a congregation is concerned.³

The motivation for forming such a synodical union was twofold: (1.) the example of the apostolic church (Acts 15:1-31); (2.) our Lord's will that the diversities of gifts should be for the common profit (1 Corinthians 12:4-31). Fundamental to this bond of stated purposes was the unequivocal pledge to hold faithfully to the articles of Christian belief taught by the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, as contained in the Book of Concord.

The congregations remain the basic units within the synod, which, in turn, is seen as an extension of these congregations, as are the various geographical districts and circuits. Through these structures the congregations exercise stated functions as agreed upon in the delegate synods which meet regularly for that purpose. The officers elected at such general synods serve in accordance with the duties assigned to them, and they remain accountable at all times to the congregations who constitute the synod along with their called pastors.

The right of judging and deciding in all matters, including doctrinal, is shared by all members of the royal priesthood, pastors and laity alike. This principle was first clearly articulated by Luther, who reminded the church of his day that Christ's admonition to guard against false prophets in sheep's clothing was spoken as much to the pew as to the pulpit—in fact, first of all to the pew. "The laymen," stated Walther, "are entitled to sit and vote together with the pastors in ecclesiastical courts and councils," and to judge in doctrinal matters (Thesis X, *Church and Ministry*). All such judgments must conform and be subject to Scripture's teaching. The right of private judgment does not entitle anyone to sit in judgment over Scripture, which, as Luther firmly contended, is its own interpreter: *Scriptura interpret sui*, or *Scriptura Scripturam interpretatur*.

While every Christian believer is obligated by virtue of his priesthood, as a baptized follower of his Lord, to speak and witness for the Word of God among all with whom he has to do, it does not follow from this that each believer holds the public pastoral office by virtue of his priesthood. For this office Scripture requires that there be special aptitude to preach and teach beyond the ability of the average Christian, and also that a man possess a valid call from the congregation of believers to administer publicly in their stead the word and sacraments. It is such call which empowers the pastor for his office; and, as Luther pointed out, it focuses his labors on a given field of labor at that place—to preach, teach, render care of the souls in his charge, administer the sacraments, exercise Christian discipline, and evangelize the unchurched. Holy Scripture speaks directly to the necessary requisites for the pastoral ministry (Titus 1:9; 1 Timothy 1:19; 3:2; 3:7; Titus 1:6), and it becomes the duty of the congregation to require that these qualifications be met. A man becomes unfit for office when he proves unfaithful to God's word and the Lutheran Confessions or persists in willful misconduct.

The importance of the congregation's call of a qualified man into the pastoral office is seen also in the relation of that call to his ordination. The former, Luther points out on the basis of Scripture, is necessary by divine injunction; the latter (ordination) is a desirable usage with roots deeply set in apostolic-ecclesial practice or ordinance. It is a solemn ratifying of the call with an earnest petitioning by all the "priests" for God's blessings upon the ordinand and the congregation which he has been called to serve. Ordination does not confer the ministry. The call and its acceptance make the minister. Should it be necessary by reason of ill health or incapacity for a man to resign his ministry, says Luther, the individual then returns to what he was before. That ordination does not confer a kind of indelible character is Luther's point.

The power of the ministry is the power of the word of God. To it, all alike, people and pastor, give unconditional obedience. It is because of that word as well as because of his office that the royal priests dutifully honor, respect, and love their pastor. In matters, however, that are not addressed by God's word there can be no binding of consciences.

Before God and His word there are no superiors or inferiors in the church, not even in the station of ministers in relation to congregations, nor between the incumbents of the pastoral ranks. Executive positions and grades of supervisory officials within the church, particularly in the *ecclesia representativa*, or synod (church body), are entirely of human origin. Whatever titles or functions are assigned to these ranks, they remain human arrangements only and may be altered or discontinued as necessary.

Bishops in the apostolic church were ministers in charge of local congregations and were also called elders. There were no bishops in the diocesan sense. The office of supervising bishop was a later addition in the church and was generally acknowledged to be of human right only. It was virtually equivalent to the office of superintendent, or of president, in synodical polity. Luther noted that even in those early days there was no basis to the notion that the episcopal office was self-perpetuating, conferred from one who has the office to another aspiring for it. As a matter of fact, in many instances it was the people's consent which bestowed the office. Nor was a bishop's consecration required for the bestowing of office. Thus, Luther installed his friend and colleague Nicolaus von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg.

The office of pastor is the one divinely instituted office in the church. Properly speaking, therefore, that man is a pastor who is the pastor of a congregation. Such other offices which may be found necessary for the church's well-being are auxiliary to that chief office and, following apostolic precedent, lie within the area of Christian liberty, either within a congregation or in a synod (church body). Such offices are created and governed by the member congregations who constitute the synod, deriving their importance and their functions in that way for the performance of joint work, programs, and counsel. On the local level there may be teachers, elders, councilmen, and the like; on a national level there may be synodical officials, various governing board executives, and so forth. All of these offices exist for the sake of the churches and their ministry of the word. Such auxiliary offices may well cease, depending upon the circumstances; but no congregation may dispense with the office of the called pastor. There is no substitute

for the pastoral office; it is the highest office in the church by virtue of its divine ordinance.

Elected executives in the *ecclesia representativa* (bishops, presidents, supervisors, and other officials) have served the church well and efficiently. It is not likely that they would ever be discontinued, as little as would the synods themselves. Constituting congregations, however, need always to be on guard against power that overreaches given limits. Human pretension and pride are always around the corner, to create episcopal officers who vaunt themselves over the royal priests, attaching to themselves titles, dress, and airs that clash with the apostolic example and word, not to mention the Master's first of all. The organizations and stations which men create in the name of the church and, indeed, of Christ Himself must serve Him and the gospel, not self-serving ambition or pretension, especially not at the expense of the "holy believers, lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd."

Thus, ultimately all authority in the church remains with the Shepherd, Christ, who bestows upon His fold, the church, royal prerogatives and responsibilities for the administering of the word and sacraments in its midst. By God's ordinance it is this royal priesthood of believers that has the authority and power to issue a divine call to a qualified man (1 Timothy 3:1ff.; Titus 1:5) into the pastoral office to do publicly the things which Christ has entrusted to the church.

Endnotes

1. January 31, 1986 (Atlanta, Georgia).
2. In his definitive study, *Government in the Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947), Carl S. Mundinger dispels the notion that the founders of the Missouri Synod were dependent upon the American political system. He states: "Any democratic political theories which the founders of the Missouri Synod might have entertained, they did not get from America, but from the same source from which they derived their theology and church polity, viz., from the writings of Martin Luther" (p.

209). "Though this polity was not made of contemporary German materials, much less of contemporary American materials, it was made in America, and it surely was tailor-made for the nineteenth-century American frontier" (p. 218). In footnote 45 on that page Munding cites two significant observations that bear on the above: (1.) The one is by H. H. Maurer in *The American Journal of Sociology* (XXXI [1925], p. 56), who noted: "By an irony of fate, it [the Missouri Synod] rises in defense of the Jeffersonian state, the limited state, the thing that was begotten in the iniquity of rationalism." (2.) The other is by Carl Mauelshagen in *American Lutheranism Surrenders to the Forces of Conservatism* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1936, p. 204): "The Missouri Synod's congregational and synodical organization was less objectionable than that of any other to the German immigrant, who came to America prejudiced against the hierarchical and consistorial form of church administration and autocratic, political government."

3. Article VII: "Relation of the Synod to Its Members."