

The Teaching of the Synodical Conference on the Office of the Public Ministry

The Spring Circuit Meeting of the Laymen of Circuit Six

Richland Lutheran Church, Thornton, Iowa

May 5, 2001

by Pastor Rolf Preus

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you today about the teaching of the Synodical Conference on the office of the public ministry. This is an important topic because the office of the ministry is a very precious gift. Jesus Christ himself instituted this holy office for the expressed purpose of giving to us the eternal treasures that he won for us on the cross. Jesus redeemed the whole world by his life of perfect obedience and his suffering for the sin of the world. He died. He was buried. He was raised again for our justification. He then showed himself alive to his disciples. All four Gospels recount Christ's calling of the apostles as his first ministers. The account most familiar to us is probably the one in St. John's Gospel because it is included in the Small Catechism. Jesus displayed to his disciples the wounds he received as he took away the sin of the world. He spoke peace to them. It was the peace promised on Christmas and won on Calvary as he drank to the bitter dregs the wrath of God against all sinners. This peace was not only intended for those frightened men, however. He said, "As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.' And when he has said this, He breathed on them, and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'" (St. John 20:22-23) In the other Gospel accounts Jesus tells his ministers to preach the gospel, to baptize, to feed his sheep, and thereby to take oversight of the flock. On the previous Thursday evening he had given them his body and blood to eat and to drink and said, "This do in remembrance of Me."

First Jesus won the treasures of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation and then he gave these treasures to his holy church. St. John writes, "there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood" (1 John 5:8). Jesus gave to his church the gospel

and the sacraments. The pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the means of grace. They literally bring God's grace to us where we live. We hear the gospel and we hear our Lord Jesus telling us that he has taken our sins away on the cross, justified us, set us free, and provided our eternal home in heaven. This is how the Holy Spirit creates and sustains saving faith in our hearts.

The pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the marks of the church. We can mark or identify the true church by recognizing these pure marks. Since no one can see or judge the faith of his neighbor, we may not and must not presume to discern who does and does not have the true faith. We most certainly can know, however, if the pure gospel is preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. The means of grace are also the marks of the church.

The pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the duty – the sole duty – of Christ's ministers. Jesus established his ministry among us for this reason and this reason alone: that through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments sinners might be justified through faith alone. The purpose of Christ's ministry is thus to preserve us in the true and saving faith through all trials, temptations, and demonic assaults.

The means of grace, the marks of the church, and the duties of the office of the public ministry are one and the same. And it is our Lord Jesus who has determined this. This is why we had better be sure of the truth of our doctrine when it comes to the office of the public ministry. This office is Christ's precious gift to us and it is Jesus who determines what it is.

Jesus gave the office of the ministry to his church. It does not belong to the ministers alone. It is his gift to all Christians and to every individual Christian. However, he did not simply toss out the duties of this office in a haphazard fashion, leaving it up to the church to figure out what to do with them. Jesus personally called his first ministers and told them quite specifically what he wanted them to do and why he wanted them to do it. They were to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments for the salvation of sinners.

We cannot understand what God teaches us about the office of the public ministry until we understand what God teaches us about how we are justified and saved. The Augsburg Confession carefully lays down for us the order of salvation. In Article II we confess the doctrine of original sin and our need for a Savior. In Article III we confess that Jesus is our Savior and that he has reconciled us to God. In Article IV we confess that we cannot become righteous before God by our own works or merits, but that we receive the forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God by grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that God, for Christ's sake, forgives us our sins. In Article V we confess that God instituted the office of the ministry to provide the gospel and the sacraments so that we may obtain the faith through which we are justified. Through the gospel that is preached and through the sacraments that are administered the Holy Spirit is given and works faith where and when God wills in those who hear the gospel. A simple way to understand the office of the ministry is to see it as God transcending space and time and bringing us to Calvary and to the empty tomb, or rather, bringing Calvary and the empty tomb to us. Were you there when they crucified my Lord? No, I was not! But my crucified and risen Lord Jesus comes to me today. He washes me at the Font, he absolves me through the words of his minister, he preaches the words that are Spirit and life to me from the Pulpit, and he feeds me with his body and blood at the Altar. I am thereby justified by faith as the Holy Spirit leads me to trust in the words of salvation that I hear.

You and I need to know that the man who baptizes, absolves, preaches, and administers the Holy Supper has been put there by God and so acts in the stead and by the command of Jesus. We need to be certain that the office Jesus instituted when he called his first ministers remains with us even today. Since Christ gave the office of the ministry to his church we can be certain that when the church calls a pastor it is God himself who acts through that call and puts his minister into the office he has instituted. We confess in Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession that "nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call." St. Paul in Romans 10:15 asks, "And how shall they preach unless they are sent?" Clearly, they cannot. Yet we read in Acts 20:28 that it was the Holy Spirit who made the pastors in Ephesus overseers of the flock and those pastors had not been chosen directly by Jesus but through the agency of the church. This is how we can

know without any doubt that the men called today through the church are called by God just as surely as Jesus Christ himself chose the original ministers when he called the apostles.

We don't teach the false notion that only a pastor who has received the laying on of hands from a bishop with the so called "apostolic succession" is rightly in the office of the ministry. We do, however, teach that our ministers are successors to the apostles. Listen to these words from Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession:

. . . the power of the keys or the power of bishops is a power and command of God to preach the Gospel, for forgive and retain sins, and to administer and distribute the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

This power of keys or of bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments (to many persons or to individuals, depending on one's calling). In this way are imparted not bodily but eternal things and gifts, namely eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These gifts cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching and of administering the holy sacraments, for St. Paul says, "the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (AC XXVIII 5-9)

This ministry of Christ among us is not the ministry or service that man offers up to God. Christ's ministry is rather the ministry or service that God offers to us. Through his ministers Christ gives to us the eternal treasures that he won for us by his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. After he purchased our salvation, he rose from the dead and instituted the ministry of reconciliation to which he graciously binds himself to the end of time.

During the 19th Century the Norwegian Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod were united in what they taught about the office of the public ministry. They were united because these three synods of the old Synodical Conference subscribed unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions. They had different histories, cultures, and languages. The Saxons who formed the Missouri Synod came to this country under the leadership of a tyrannical bishop that they deposed shortly after their arrival in America. They were then

required to go back to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions to prove that the office of the ministry did indeed belong to the church and not just to the pastors. The Norwegian Synod, on the other hand, had to appeal to the Lutheran Confessions to oppose self-appointed lay preachers who presumed to preach without a call from the church to do so. Quite different circumstances brought these Norwegian and German Lutheran immigrants together.

During most of the second part of the 19th century, C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, was also the leader of confessional Lutherans in America. When the Norwegian Synod was first begun and they were in search of a seminary in America at which they could train their future pastors they turned to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. What united those German and Norwegian Lutheran immigrants was a common devotion to the pure gospel teaching contained in the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The established Lutheran churches in the eastern part of the United States had long before compromised with the Protestant mainstream and the Pietists in the Midwest likewise despised the authority of the Lutheran Confessions. The founders of the Norwegian Synod – the mother church of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod – were strongly committed to the Lutheran Confessions because they knew that these confessions faithfully taught the pure teaching of the Bible, God's inerrant word.

I cannot overstate how important it was for our forefathers to remain faithful to the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions. Time does not permit me to give a thorough presentation of what the old Synodical Conference taught on the doctrine of the ministry. If you really want to know what they taught, you simply must read the Lutheran Confessions and take their scriptural testimony to heart. The founders of the Norwegian Synod regarded themselves and their posterity – you and me – to be bound to the biblical teaching contained in the Lutheran Confessions. It was the confessional fidelity of the synods that comprised the Synodical Conference that united them. And they were united.

When we examine the teaching of the Norwegian Synod, the Missouri Synod, and the Wisconsin Synod during the 19th century, we find an amazing agreement on the office of the public ministry. They agreed that this office was instituted by God and was distinct from the

priesthood of all believers. They agreed that this office belonged to the whole church and not to the ministers only. They agreed that this office was entered into by a legitimate call from the church, and while they refused to say that ordination was absolutely necessary, they never failed to ordain their ministers. They also all spoke of the office of the public ministry and the office of the parish pastor as one and the same thing.

This should not surprise us since this is how the Lutheran Confessions speak of the office. The minister is the one who preaches the gospel, baptizes, absolves, administers the Lord's Supper, and provides evangelical discipline and oversight of the congregation. We usually call the one who does this the pastor. In the Bible and in the Lutheran Confessions he is called by a number of titles, including preacher, elder, pastor, teacher, and bishop. These various titles all refer to the same office.

If you were to read over the appendixes you have received you will see that the 19th century confessional Lutherans of the Norwegian Synod, Missouri Synod, and Wisconsin Synod all taught that the office of the ministry is the pastoral office. The purpose and the duties of the office were spelled out in Article V of the Augsburg Confession which in the German calls the ministry the "preaching office" and the call into the office was mandated by Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession. Consider, first of all, Walther's Theses on the Ministry that you have as Appendix A. Walther clearly identifies the ministry of preaching with the pastoral office. Appendix B is the Theses on Lay Preaching adopted by our synod in 1862. In theses one, two, three, and five, we read of the "public ministerial office" and learn that it is the only office instituted by God for the edification of Christians and that it is for our salvation by God's word. Who is in this "public ministerial office"? Thesis six tells us. The pastor* is.

The 1907 Catechism of the Norwegian Synod that you have as Appendix C teaches the same thing. In explaining the meaning of the Call that is required by Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession, question #516 asks, "Who are those that are properly the Church's servants?" The answer? "Those who by a proper Call from God are ordained can rightfully teach others God's Word and legitimately administer the Sacraments." Who is the one who teaches God's

word and administers the sacraments? He is the pastor. The person who is called into the office of the public ministry may carry out all of the duties of the office.

This is the teaching of the great Wisconsin Synod theologian, Adolf Hoenecke. Look under Appendix D at the first thesis that he prepared in his Dogmatics on the office of the ministry. He writes, "The teaching office, by which we here mean the pastors, the estate composed of the servants of the Word, is divinely instituted."

The unanimous testimony of the great confessional Lutheran theologians of the 19th Century Synodical Conference was that the office of the public ministry and the pastoral office were one and the same thing.

Then things changed.

It started out in a dispute in Cincinnati in 1899 about a father who was excommunicated from a Missouri Synod congregation for no good reason. I'll spare you the details of the case, but it ended up involving both the Missouri and the Wisconsin synods and it raised the question about who had the right to excommunicate. Was it only the local congregation? Or did a synod also have that right? If so, a synod was also a church. If only the local congregation could excommunicate, this must mean that only the local congregation was a church.

The scriptural and confessional definition of the church is simple. We read in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII, "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered." Obviously this takes place in the local congregation. Everyone agreed that the local congregation was a church. But did this definition of the church apply to other gatherings? Some said yes, some said no.

A Wisconsin Synod theologian by the name of August Pieper argued strongly in favor of the opinion that a synod was a church in the very same sense as a congregation was a church. He insisted that God had not ordained any particular form of the church. The church was any gathering or grouping of Christians around the word of God. The local congregation was not the divinely established form of the church. August Pieper's view came to be known as the "Wisconsin" position, while the view that only the congregation was properly to be regarded as

the church came to be known as the “Missouri” position. Proponents of both views were found in both of these synods as well as in our own ELS. I suspect that most folks are somewhere in between the two positions, teaching that the congregation is a church in a sense that the synod is not, but still believing that the synod is a church in a sense because it is made up of churches. At any rate, we don’t have the time today to settle this argument that is still being argued.

The reason I have to bring it is that the flip side of this debate about the church is a debate about the ministry as well. Of course, that’s to be expected. Since the ministry belongs to the church, and the church has the authority to call ministers, if there is no divinely fixed form for the church it stands to reason that there is no divinely fixed form for the ministry, either. This was August Pieper’s position.

Up until this debate, the Synodical Conference was agreed that the office of the public ministry and the pastoral office were the same thing and that this was the only office that Jesus instituted for his church on earth. When they spoke of other offices in the church, such as parochial school teachers, they would call them auxiliary or assisting offices. Our Lutheran Confessions refer to the schoolteacher only once. In the Large Catechism Luther teaches us that the office of the schoolteacher derives from the office of father and mother. We read, “Out of the authority of parents all other authority is derived and developed. Where a father is unable by himself to bring up his children, he calls upon a schoolmaster to teach him.” (LC Ten Commandments, 141) August Pieper’s older brother, Reinhold, taught the same thing. Within the old Synodical Conference some joined the parochial school teacher’s office to the pastoral office since it carried out a portion of the pastor’s duties under the pastor’s supervision. This was the view of Walther, Hoenecke, Francis Pieper and others.

Of course, in the old country, the schoolteacher would teach religion according to the rules of the state. In America, with separation of church and state, the church had to figure out just where to “plug in” the parochial school teacher. Our forefathers did not always agree on precisely how this should be done. They did agree, however, that the pastoral office was divinely instituted and that the office of parochial school teacher was not divinely instituted. The pastoral office was necessary for the church. The church could not exist without it. The

office of parochial school teacher carried out duties already assigned by God to parents and pastors.

What August Pieper and his colleagues in Wauwatosa did was to break radical new ground. They said that the “preaching office” of Articles V and XIV of the Augsburg Confession was not the pastoral office. They taught that the pastoral office itself was just one form of the office that Jesus instituted. According to this opinion, we need not say that the schoolteacher’s office derives from the pastoral office. We can teach instead that it is simply another form of the ministry that the church may establish. And, of course, the church may establish as many forms of the ministry as she wishes subject, of course, to the scriptural command that everything be done decently and in good order and that women may not have authority over men in the church.

This is the new Wisconsin Synod view of the ministry as presented in Appendix E. Look at the single antithesis at the end. It reads, “We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.” The unanimous view of the theologians of the Synodical Conference, including the venerable Wisconsin Synod theologian, Adolf Hoenecke, is regarded as untenable in the Wisconsin Synod today.

The new Wisconsin Synod opinion originated when English was replacing German as the language of the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod. The term “preaching office” – an office that surely would require a preacher – came into English as ministry, which is a rather vague term. We all know what a preacher is. A preacher preaches. What is a minister, however? He need not be a preacher at all. This explains the current practice of talking about the “preaching ministry” as a reference to pastors and the “teaching ministry” as a reference to parochial school teachers. Now there would be nothing particularly wrong with talking this way if we made it clear that God himself instituted the so called “preaching ministry” and that the church instituted the so called “teaching ministry.” Unfortunately, this is not made clear.

So let me be very clear about this. The Bible says that Jesus sent out preachers who preached. That is why our Lutheran Confessions identify the office Jesus established as the preaching office. The church certainly may establish assisting offices that will carry out the duties of both parents and pastors and when she does so these servants should be honored, even as children should honor their parents and their pastors. However, the honor we show to one another as we seek to carry out the duties of our various callings must never confuse what God has instituted with what the church has instituted.

Let me illustrate my concern. God has instituted Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He did not institute Confirmation. We may observe the rite of confirmation as a church custom or we may not, as circumstances might determine. But we may not fail to baptize or to celebrate the Lord's Supper. Similarly, we may have parochial schools staffed by dedicated, confessional Lutheran men and women who carry out a holy calling as they assist parents and pastors in their God given duties. Or, we may choose not to have parochial schools. We may not choose not to have pastors. The church is the assembly of saints among whom the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. God has joined together the means of grace, the marks of the church, and the duties of the office of the ministry. What God has joined together let not man put asunder.

Jesus formed the office of the ministry by putting together into one specific position the duties of preaching, teaching, baptizing, absolving, administering the Lord's Supper, and taking oversight of the flock.** Every single duty of the office is for the purpose of bringing us to the saving faith and giving us eternal life. The law that the pastor preaches always serves the purpose of the gospel. When you come to a Lutheran church and listen to a Lutheran minister you should be hearing the words of life that reveal to your sinful heart the blood of Jesus shed for you on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. Everything the minister does is for that very purpose. It is an evangelical purpose. The minister does not have any civil authority. The minister may and must preach God's law to you, and this law condemns you to hell. That is the main purpose of the law preached by the Lutheran minister. But he may not issue you a fine, require you to do penance, or administer any kind of physical penalty at all. The purpose of his law preaching is to lead you to despair of yourself and to acknowledge

your utter sinfulness and helplessness so that you will learn to trust in the gospel alone for your salvation. This is the purpose of the ministry as we confess it so clearly in Article V of the Augsburg Confession.

The parochial school teacher also teaches God's word to the children. When he or she teaches the gospel that gospel has the very same power and comfort as the gospel preached by the pastor. However, while the pastor's office is solely to administer the means of grace, the schoolteacher's office includes administering external discipline. She must apply penalties. Little Johnny must sit in the corner, have a "time out", write sentences, or receive a "D" on a test. The primary purpose of the law for the parochial school teacher is to require the children to behave. It is her duty to discipline them so that they may become responsible citizens and productive members of society. This is what parents have the right to expect.

I have learned something over the years about the "ministry" of the Christian Day School teacher. I have learned that even the most pious, dedicated, and thoroughly orthodox Lutheran teacher cannot do the job that God has given him or her to do by relying solely on the power of the gospel. It doesn't work. A pastor, on the other hand, cannot do his job unless he relies solely on the power of the gospel. The reason is obvious. The nature of the tasks is different.

The pastor dare not evaluate his work on the basis of the performance of his parishioners. Of course, many pastors do, and they invariably fall into legalistic and manipulative techniques by which to improve the outward behavior of people instead of relying on the power of the gospel to create faith, new life, and new desires. The schoolteacher, on the other hand, must evaluate her work on the basis of the performance of her students. If the children cannot read or write or if they talk when she is talking, she isn't doing her job.

What I am saying is that the essence of the pastor's job is evangelical, while the essence of the schoolteacher's job is legal. But does not the gospel motivate everything that the parochial school teacher does? And is it not the power as well to sanctify every single activity in the classroom and every kind of study? Indeed it is. And this gospel sanctifies as well the holy vocations of the Christian mother, father, farmer, lawyer, laborer, and civil servant. When

we teach our Christian Day School teachers that they are called into the public ministry of the church they will naturally begin to believe that what they do when they discipline children is Christ's ministry. This breeds legalism. God instituted the full ministry of preaching the gospel, forgiving and retaining sins, administering the sacraments, and serving as the representative of Jesus Christ for the benefit of Christ's people. But Jesus doesn't give out "C's" or make you sit in the corner or give you homework. This is not Christ's ministry. When we call the actual work of the Christian Day School teacher the work of the public ministry, we confuse law and gospel. We redefine Christ's evangelical ministry and turn it into a law ministry. This is the way it works.

I attended Lutheran parochial schools for most of my grade school and high school years. I have served as the pastor of about forty Christian Day School teachers over the years. I served as the pastor of a Lutheran congregation with a parochial school that was also affiliated with a local Lutheran high school for over eight years. My children's total years of instruction by Christian Day School teachers is about ninety years. I share this biographical information with you just so that you will know I have a little bit of personal experience with the parochial school system. What I have learned is that the very best Christian Day School teachers are the ones who act as if they are the children's mom or dad. In my opinion we have done a great disservice to many faithful Lutheran schoolteachers by telling them that they are in the ministry. They have fretted over their inability to run a classroom by the gospel. But nobody can do that! It is an impossible task! I am a minister of the gospel and as such I can do my job without the exercise of any coercive power whatsoever. I am also a father and I cannot do that job without ever resorting to coercion. So why don't we tell our Christian Day School teachers that they represent the fathers and the mothers of the children they serve and that their offices derive from the parental office as the Large Catechism teaches? Surely there can be no greater or higher calling than to raise children. If our desire is to honor those who devote themselves to this holy task let us do so by extolling the divinely ordained office of father and mother. Does a Christian Day School teacher have a divine call? Yes! By all means, yes! It is the divine call to assist parents in the rearing of their children.

There is nothing inherently wrong with the idea that a parochial school teacher takes over a part of the pastor's job. When our forefather's set down that arrangement and spoke of a divine call for the teacher on that account, it was perfectly permissible for them to do so. But they could just as easily have defined the office of Christian Day School teacher entirely as an extension of the office of father and mother as Luther did and as Reinhold Pieper did. Frankly, I wish they had. It would have spared us much confusion in our day. But we can agree to disagree on precisely how we should categorize the work of the Christian Day School teacher since this office does carry out duties that belong to both parents and pastors. What I hope we do not do is to elevate to a doctrinal status the claim that a parochial school teacher is in the office of the public ministry. According to the Augsburg Confession, only preachers are in the office of the public ministry and parochial school teachers are not preachers.

Time does not permit a thorough analysis of the Theses on the Ministry prepared by the Doctrine Committee of our synod. The members of the Doctrine Committee should be commended for spending so much time and work on the theses they have prepared. It is especially difficult to work hard on something and then have to see your work criticized. This is why I offer my criticism as a brother who sincerely appreciates the hard work of his brothers even when he has to express disagreement with them. Much of what the Theses say is quite sound and needs to be affirmed. I cannot support the Theses for two basic reasons. First, they fail to distinguish correctly between what is divinely instituted and what is not. Second, they define the ministry too loosely.

The Theses do not say that the pastoral office is divinely instituted. In Thesis 6 we read that "a form like the pastoral office is indispensable to the church." Nowhere do we read that the pastoral office is instituted by Christ. The reason for this is that the Theses are designed to agree with the new Wisconsin Synod teaching that the pastoral office is no more divinely instituted than any other form that has been or might be invented. But when Jesus instituted this office he told specific men to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. This is what he does today as well through the call of the church. This is, by definition, the job of the

pastor. Therefore, the church must acknowledge that the pastoral office is more than merely the most “comprehensive form” of the office of the ministry. It is the office of the ministry.

This is not to say that the church is not at liberty to establish offices to assist the pastoral office, whether this be parochial school teachers, Sunday School teachers, or whatever. This is not to say that the church is not at liberty to call pastors to a more focused form of the office, as, for example, a visitation pastor, a chaplain, a missionary, or a theological professor. This we may do. What we may not do is confuse the divinely mandated office to which our Lord has bound his gracious presence to the end of time and without which we cannot even be Christ’s church with any other office that we in Christian liberty may choose to establish.

Second, the Theses define the office too loosely by saying that the ministry is any use of the means of grace on behalf of the church and in the name and stead of Christ. This is an inadequate definition. By this definition we can have a divine call into the office of the public ministry to carry out any portion of any function of the office. The possibilities are endless. Jesus did not simply toss out duties to be done and leave it up to us how to arrange those duties. There is an organic connection between baptizing and preaching and teaching and absolving and administering the Lord’s Supper to God’s people. The word and the sacraments go together. To conceive of the ministry apart from the full use of these precious treasures of God’s grace is to distort its very essence. Finely tuned distinctions between comprehensive and limited forms, formal and informal calls, and so forth may look good on paper and may even work in the abstract, but Christ didn’t institute an abstract office. He called real flesh and blood men (not women) and he gave them specific tasks. He does so today. Since this is Christ’s ministry we must accept it as his gift and not dismember it according to our own fancy. It is his ministry, not ours. We may not do with it what we choose.

C. F. W. Walther taught that the sheep must judge their shepherds. He was right. The laity of the church have the duty to judge doctrine. This is why meetings such as this one are so important. We need to talk theology together. The ministers of the church have the duty to explain to the laity that their doctrine is sound. I have argued today that the office of the public ministry and the pastoral office are the same thing. I believe that I have shown you

this is the teaching of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the Synodical Conference. It has also been the teaching of the ELS. The office of the ministry is also called the office of the keys. Let me read to you question and answer number 297 from the 1981 edition of the ELS Catechism. "How do Christians publicly administer the Office of the Keys? Christians publicly administer the Office of the Keys by calling qualified men to forgive and to retain sins on their behalf (office of the public ministry)." (p 213)

Let me conclude by speaking from my heart in expressing my admiration of the Wisconsin Synod. While the much larger Missouri Synod got bitten so badly by the respectability bug that she was willing to compromise with error after error, the Wisconsin Synod stood firmly on the word of God even when it wasn't popular to do so. She stood firmly for biblical inerrancy and the pure gospel while she courageously opposed religious unionism, feminism, and numerous other errors, even taking a stand against the Boy Scouts. That takes courage. She stood by the ELS as a faithful brother should, and we owe our brothers respect. I want you all to know that this is how I feel.

I also believe that a brother's duty to a brother is never to imitate him when he is wrong.*** We in the ELS should not adopt the new Wisconsin Synod position on the ministry. We should show our brothers the kind of love and respect that takes true courage. We should tell them in love where we must respectfully disagree with them as we invite them to return with us to the confessional Lutheran foundation from which our synods were born.

*The Norwegian version uses the word *prest* which translates into the English, according to Einar Haugen's *Norsk Engelsk Ordbok* as clergyman, minister, or pastor. Of course it is related to the English word, priest, a word we don't ordinarily use to refer to a pastor.

**It is true that a pastor will at times be called to a position in which he does not ordinarily carry out all of the duties of the office. If the discussion of "forms" of the ministry were merely a discussion about whether or not a pastor remains in the ministry if he takes a call to teach at

the seminary or to begin a mission congregation somewhere, that would be one kind of discussion. We could affirm our historic teaching that God did indeed establish the pastoral office but that at times the incumbents of this office may be serving in a more focused or specialized area. Still, they would be pastors who could, if necessary, take on the full duties of the one office.

***My disagreement with the Wisconsin Synod on this matter is not an accusation of false doctrine against the Wisconsin Synod.

The Teaching of the Synodical Conference on the Office of the Public Ministry Appendixes

- A. Walther's Theses on the Ministry**
- B. 1862 Theses on Lay Preaching**
- C. 1907 Catechism of the Norwegian Synod**
- D. The Old Teaching of the Wisconsin Synod (Adolf Hoenecke, 1835 – 1908)**
- E. The New Teaching of the Wisconsin Synod (adopted in 1969)**
- A. Walther's Theses on the Ministry**

C.F.W. Walther

Theses on the Ministry

1852

Thesis I

The holy ministry, or the pastoral office, is an office distinct from the priestly office, which belongs to all believers.

Thesis II

The ministry, or the pastoral office, is not a human ordinance, but an office established by God Himself.

Thesis III

The ministry of preaching is not an arbitrary office, but its character is such that the Church has been commanded to establish it and is ordinarily bound to it until the end of days.

Thesis IV

The ministry of preaching is not a peculiar order, set up over and against the common estate of Christians, and holier than the later, like the priesthood of the Levites, but it is an office of service.

Thesis V

The ministry of preaching is conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of all church power, or of the keys, and by its call, as prescribed by God. The ordination of those called, with the laying on of hands, is not by divine institution but is an apostolic church ordinance and merely a public, solemn confirmation of the call.

A. The ministry of preaching is conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of all church power, or of the keys, and by its call, as prescribed by God.

B. The ordination of those called, with the laying on of hands, is not by divine institution but is an apostolic church ordinance and merely a public, solemn confirmation of the call.

Thesis VII

The holy ministry is the authority conferred by God through the congregation, as holder of the priesthood and of all church power, to administer in public office the common rights of the spiritual priesthood in behalf of all.

Thesis VIII

The ministry is the highest office in the Church, from which, as its stem, all other offices of the Church issue.

Thesis IX

Reverence and unconditional obedience is due to the ministry of preaching when the preacher is ministering the Word of God. However, the preacher may not dominate over the Church; he has, accordingly, no right to make new laws, to arrange indifferent matters and ceremonies arbitrarily, and to impose and execute excommunication ALONE, without a previous verdict of the entire congregation.

- A. Reverence and unconditional obedience is due to the ministry of preaching when the preacher is ministering the Word of God.
- B. The preacher may not dominate over the Church; he has accordingly no right to make new laws and to arrange indifferent matters and ceremonies arbitrarily.
- C. The preacher has no right to impose and execute excommunication ALONE, without a previous verdict of the entire congregation.

Thesis X

According to divine right the function of passing judgment on doctrine belongs indeed to the ministry of preaching. However, also the laymen have this right, and for this reason they also have a seat and vote with the preachers in church courts and councils.

B. 1862 Theses on Lay Preaching of the Norwegian Synod (From Grace for Grace, p 139)

1. God has instituted the public ministerial office for the public edification of the Christians unto salvation by the Word of God.
2. God has not instituted any other office for the public edification of the Christians to be used along-side of the public ministerial office.
3. When a man assumes the direction of the public edification of the Christians by the Word, he thereby assumes and exercises the public ministerial office.
4. It is a sin when a person assumes this (office) without a call or without need.

5. It is both a right and a duty in case of actual need for anyone who is capable of doing so to exercise the public ministerial office in a Christian and orderly manner.

6. The only correct definition of "need" is that there exists a need when a pastor is not at hand and cannot be secured; or when, if there is a pastor, he either does not serve the people properly but teaches false doctrine, or cannot serve them adequately but only so rarely that the people cannot thereby be brought to faith or be kept in it and be defended against errors, so that the Christian must faint for lack of care.

7. When such need exists, efforts should be made to relieve it by definite and proper arrangements according as circumstances will permit.

C. A Selection from the 1907 Edition of the Norwegian Synod Catechism by Dr. Johann Conrad Dietrich (in use when the "Little Norwegian Synod" – now called the Evangelical Lutheran Synod – was formed in 1918)

515. Shall then in accordance with this any Christian be so bold, though himself having no call, as to administer the Office of the Keys?

By no means; for "No one in the Church shall teach or preach or administer the sacraments without a proper Call". [Augsburg Confession, Article 14]

Rom. 10:15: And how shall they preach, unless they are sent?

1 Cor. 12:29: Are all Apostles? Are all Prophets? Are all Teachers?

1 Cor. 4:1: Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God.

James 3:1: My brothers! Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that as such we shall incur a stronger judgment.

Jer. 23:21: I have not sent these prophets, but they ran.

Hebr. 5:4: And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.

516. Who are those that are properly the Church's servants?

Those who by a proper Call from God are ordained can rightfully teach others God's Word and legitimately administer the Sacraments.

D. The Old Teaching of the Wisconsin Synod (from Adolf Hoenecke, Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Northwestern Publishing House, 1999, page 187).

Thesis 1

The teaching office (Lehramt), by which we here mean the pastors, the estate composed of the servants of the Word, is divinely instituted.

E. The New Teaching of the Wisconsin Synod (officially adopted in 1969)

Doctrinal Statements of the WELS

Prepared by the

Commission on Inter-Church Relations of the
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1997

THESES ON THE CHURCH AND MINISTRY

Introduction to the Theses

The Theses on the Church and Ministry in their present form were adopted by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1969. They were the distillation of nearly a century of study, discussion, and debate.

In the late 1870s the Christian day school teachers of the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods in Wisconsin began to discuss the nature of their call. Where did their work in the church fit in the New Testament delineation of the public ministry? Was it a branch of the work of a pastor, who was to shepherd all the flock of which the Holy Spirit had made him an overseer (Ac 20:28)? Or was it an extension of parents' responsibility to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4)?

Both pastors and teachers of the two sister synods in the Manitowoc, Wisconsin, area discussed the question in the mid-1880s. It was agreed that the teachers' work was divinely instituted since it involved the teaching of God's Word. But could it be identified with any of the offices in Ephesians 4:11 where pastors and teachers are mentioned? More study was needed.

At a pastors' conference in 1892, Wisconsin Synod Seminary Director Adolf Hoenecke, noting that the work of a Christian day school teacher is not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures, derived the teacher's call from the pastor's. In the discussion it was suggested that, since the teacher is called by the congregation, the teacher's work falls directly under the shepherding spoken of in Acts 20:28 and need not be considered an offshoot of the pastor's call to establish its divine nature.

In the following years the seminary faculty intensively studied the pertinent Scripture passages to answer the question: Is the office of pastor, apart from the apostolate, the only divinely instituted office in the church? Closely related was the question: Is the local congregation the only divinely instituted form of the church? Practical situations made the answer to these questions imperative.

Especially difficult was the so-called Cincinnati case. This involved some excommunications in a Missouri Synod congregation. When the district criticized the excommunications and upheld the district president's suspension of the pastors of the congregation, the congregation and its pastors applied for membership in the Wisconsin Synod. So Wisconsin was drawn into the case and had to consider: What happens when a synod's action conflicts with a congregation's excommunication? Which is supreme, a congregation or a synod?

The Missouri Synod's St. Louis seminary faculty entered the debate, objecting to articles published in Wisconsin's theological journal. These articles pointed out that God has prescribed no legal regulations for the New Testament church. Hence, as Acts 6:1-6 shows, the church is free to establish whatever forms of public ministry it in Christian wisdom and in keeping with good order and love considers useful. Likewise, in Christian liberty it can

organize itself in whatever ways it chooses in accordance with these principles. The articles recognized that the pastorate of a congregation as we know it today cannot be equated with any office of the public ministry mentioned in the New Testament.

In the articles, it was noted that there is no passage in the New Testament which establishes the pastorate of a local congregation as the one divinely instituted form of the public ministry, nor is there a passage which establishes the local congregation as the one divinely instituted form of the church. Various kinds of public servants of the Word are Christ's gift to his church, as is clear from Ephesians 4:11, 1 Corinthians 12:28, and other passages, and the gathering of Christians into various groups is the work of the Holy Spirit, as Luther's Explanation of the Third Article states.

The St. Louis faculty, on the other hand, argued that the local congregation is the one divinely instituted form of the church and that a synod is a purely human organization. Likewise, it held that the office of pastor of a local congregation is the only divinely instituted form of the public ministry and all other forms are auxiliary to it.

Although, for convenience' sake, the one position was spoken of as the Missouri and the other as the Wisconsin position, in fact there were supporters of both positions in both synods. Representatives of the St. Louis faculty met with the Thiensville faculty in 1932 and drew up the "Thiensville Theses" as a preliminary step toward a settlement of the controversy. No further steps were taken, however. In 1946 the Synodical Conference established an Interim Committee to address these issues, but the question remained unsettled.

In the late 1950s new committees were appointed to attempt to settle doctrinal questions that were disturbing the unity in the Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin committee drew up the statement on church and ministry for these deliberations. The differences in the doctrine of church fellowship took center stage, however, and the issue of church and ministry never came before the group.

The theses do not address the question of whether women may serve in the public ministry. At the time of writing the issue of women pastors had not yet come to the fore. Because of the fact that for decades women had served in the public ministry as Christian day school and Sunday school teachers, it was taken for granted that they may serve in positions that do not involve exercising authority over men. The statement on “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles” adopted in 1993 specifically addresses this issue.

Theses on the Church and Ministry

II. The Ministry

A. Christ instituted one office in His Church, the ministry of the Gospel.

It is the task of proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Jn 20:21-23; Ac 1:8; 1 Pe 2:9; Lk 22:19,20. This office or service, the ministry of the keys, has been given to the Church, i.e., to the believers individually and collectively. Mt 16:19; 10:32; 18:18; 1 Pe 2:9.

Augsburg Confession V, 1,2: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel . . .”

Formula of Concord Solid Declaration XII, 30: “That the ministry of the Church, the Word preached and heard . . .”

B. The purpose of this ministry is the edification of the Church, by winning ever further sinners for Christ, and by building up those who are already members in Christian faith and life. Mt 28:18-20; Eph 4:11-14; 1 Co 12:7.

C. From *the beginning of the Church* there were *men especially appointed to discharge publicly* (in behalf of a group of Christians) the *duties of this one ministry*. Ac 13:1-3; 6:1-6.

D. This public ministry is not generically different from that of the common priesthood of all Christians. It constitutes a special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel.

1. All Christians are equal before God, neither superior nor inferior to one another, and all are equally entrusted with the same ministry of the Gospel. 1 Pe 2:9. Hence no one may assume the functions of the public ministry except through a legitimate call. Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 67-69: The authority to call (*ius vocandi*) is implied in the authority to administer the Gospel (*ius ministrandi evangelii*) given to the Church. Hence, it is proper to speak of the derived right of local congregations to call.

2. God is a God of order; He wants us to conduct all of our affairs orderly (1 Co 14:33,40) and in the spirit of love (1 Co 16:14).

3. Christians are not all equally qualified to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. The Lord sets forth the needed qualifications of those who are to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. 1 Ti 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-11. God gives to the Church men qualified for the various forms of the work required. Eph 4:7-16; Ro 12:6-8; 1 Co 12:4-11,28-31.

4. These gifts should be gratefully received and developed. 1 Co 12:31; 1 Th 5:19,20; 1 Ti 4:14; 2 Ti 1:6-9.

5. Thus these public ministers are appointed by God. Ac 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28. It would be wrong to trace the origin of this public ministry to mere expediency (Hoefling).

6. There is, however, *no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry*. The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand. Ac 6:1-6. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Various functions are

mentioned in Scripture: 1 Ti 4:13; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28; Ro 12:6-8; 2 Ti 2:2; Jn 21:15-17 (feeding); Ac 20:28 (watching); 1 Ti 3:2; 4:11; 6:2 (teaching); 1 Ti 3:5; 5:17 (ruling). In spite of the great diversity in the external forms of the ministerial work, the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the Gospel, not only those enumerated above, e.g., in Eph 4:11 and 1 Co 12:28, but also those developed in our day, are all gifts of the exalted Christ to His Church which the Church receives gratefully and with due regard for love and order employs under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the spiritual body of Christ; and all of them are comprehended under the general commission to preach the Gospel given to all believers.

Antithesis:

We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.
