

Walther Redeivivus

The Decline of the Doctrine of Church and Ministry
in the Missouri Synod, 1840-1940

by R. Dennis Rardin
Senior Church History
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The doctrine of church and ministry has time and again been abused and misunderstood in the church. Beginning almost immediately after the apostles died, the church began erecting the ecclesiastical hierarchy which culminated in the revelation of the Papacy as Antichrist. Bishop, priest and monk were separated from layman by vows of celibacy and poverty. After Constantine established Christianity as the state religion of Rome, the voice of laymen in the church was gradually muted. Holy Orders and the *character indelibilis* gave this separation the theological imprimatur of the church. By the time of the Reformation, Rome had completely robbed the laity of the power of the keys.

One of the under-appreciated themes of Luther's theology is his strong emphasis on the universal priesthood. In *Address to the German Nobility* and *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther's exposition of this doctrine shattered papal and clerical claims to exclusive use of the keys and the Means of Grace. In his letter to Prague concerning the establishment of an evangelical church in Bohemia, he beautifully teaches his readers about the wonderful freedom of Christians to establish for themselves the forms of their ministry, and in doing so also reminds them that a public ministry does not relieve the laity of their responsibility to exercise their priesthood in their own daily lives.

But the doctrine never received its due in practice. The laity of Luther's time were woefully unprepared to take their rightful place in the work of the church. The struggles with Rome did not give the young church opportunity to implement reform gradually, as the people were educated. Of necessity, Luther worked through the princes to wrest control of the calling of ministers from Roman bishops. He saw this as a temporary expedient, which would be abrogated as soon as the laity at large were ready to participate meaningfully in the government of their own churches.

But with the Peace of Augsburg's policy of *cuius regio, eius religio*, this power was permanently vested in the princes. (This insight is that of Professor Lawrenz in the article cited below.) The church became an arm of the state in Germany (and in Lutheran Scandinavia as well). What had been intended as a short-lived expedient became the permanent state of affairs in Lutheran Germany. The bishops were replaced by the princes or city councils with their appointed consistories, and the power of the keys continued to reside in an authoritarian hierarchy. Luther teachings regarding the public ministry and its basis in the priesthood of believers was never honored in the observance, although during the age of orthodoxy it was clearly understood by Chemnitz et al. whence the rulers derived this right.

Thus also in our time the distinguished piety of our rulers is to be praised, according to which they placed skillful and competent teachers over their subjects, not in order that congregations should be deprived of their rights; but because the people neither understood their rights nor used them, and the right judgment of the people was hindered through the old (papistical) errors, they took the people under their tutelage, and represented the church. ¹

Pietism's reform attempts reached back to this principle in its emphasis on individual Bible study, and on the role of laymen in building up the church. However, their doctrinal and practical aberrations served to discredit the practice of the universal priesthood and entrench the hierarchy as the only safe way to run a church. When the Lutheran church, weakened by pietism, was ravaged by the rationalism and unionism of the 18th and 19th centuries, the laity were powerless to resist. Even the free churches were founded by conscientious pastors, not by lay leaders outraged at being robbed of the Gospel.

¹ C.F.W. Walther, *The Congregation's Right to Choose Its Pastor*, trans. Fred Kramer. Eureka, MO: Reformation Ministries, no date. (This is a translation of Walther's *Das Gemeinderecht*, which appeared in *Der Lutheraner* from September, 1860 until August, 1861 in 14 installments.)

So it is understandable that when the Lutherans came to America, there would have to be a radical rethinking of the nature of the church and her ministry. Meaningful use of the power of the keys had not, in practice, been in the hands of the laity for 1500 years. Yet in America the separation of church and state made it impossible for the immigrant church to follow over a millenium of precedent.

When one considers the beginnings of these immigrant churches, he should keep in mind the tremendous pressures this state of affairs put on clerical leaders like Stephan and Grabau. They had stood virtually alone in Germany; this had required of them a great deal of independence and willingness to ignore criticism. These same qualities they would also need in America, where a chaotic maelstrom of heresies and outright inventions passed for Christianity among many of the people. (One wonders what the Saxons must have thought of religious liberty as they settled in Perry County. The new theocracy in Nauvoo, Illinois, set up in the aftermath of armed conflict between Joseph Smith's Mormons and the Missouri state militia in October, 1838, was not so far away. It might be added that the chaotic religious atmosphere in upstate New York produced Smith in the first place.) The people naturally placed a great deal of trust in men who had stood up for orthodoxy in the face of imprisonment and exile. As they came across the Atlantic, the people's natural assumption was that church government in the New World would resemble that practiced by orthodox Lutherans for centuries. But in America there were no consistories, seminaries, or secular authorities to check the power of these leaders. All responsibility fell to these men, almost by default.

Both Stephan and Grabau succumbed to the temptations latent in their exalted positions. Had Stephan not been found guilty of adultery and deposed, Grabau's Romanizing might have carried the day among conservative American Lutherans. It was as close to traditional German church government as could be attained here, and the temptations of the flesh would lead to such a thing.

Walther's response to the crisis in Perry County was to delve into Scripture, the Confessions, and the Fathers. There, of course, he rediscovered the Scriptural teaching of the Church and Ministry. In their historical setting, his Theses on Church and Ministry have a very understandable emphasis on the rights of the local congregation. They were forged in the hot furnace of offended consciences as the Saxons wondered whether the Means of Grace were valid among them. They were hammered on the anvil of Grabau's demands for almost papal authority.

This is the primary explanation for Walther's preoccupation for proving his theses with quotations from the church fathers and orthodox theologians. He sought to establish the fact that he was returning to, not departing from, the doctrine of the Reformation and the church catholic. One must also remember that as he had made his way from rationalism to orthodoxy during his days at the University of Leipzig, his guides were Luther and the orthodox theologians, especially Baier. To them he turned in the hour of crisis, and there he found the truths which soothed the consciences of those he served, and his own as well. While some, including J.P. Koehler, fault Walther for his lack of in-depth exegesis, the author has little sympathy for this view. He found comfort for consciences in the dogmaticians and Luther, and at the same time established Missouri as the inheritor of orthodox Lutheranism instead of Buffalo. Not a bad day's work for men buried two or three centuries earlier.

Nevertheless, through no fault of Walther's, the theological vocabulary available to him brought a lot of extra baggage along. The ministry in Europe had been stereotyped as a hierarchy of one kind or another for centuries; terminology like *Amt*, *Predigtamt*, *Pfarramt*, *Kirche* and *Gemeinschaft* had unavoidable connotations brought over from Germany. *Amt* might seem to be a very neutral term, yet one who held an *Amt* in Germany received it by appointment, and in carrying out his duties was more responsible to those above him than those "below"--the members of the congregation. He was responsible for seeing that the other workers in the congregation (school teachers, catechetical instructors, etc.) carried out their duties faithfully. As long as his superiors left him there, the pastor ran the show. The holder of an *Amt*, in practice, was a member of a hierarchy, subject to some and superior to others.

Walther did not, to this writer's knowledge, ever define his understanding of his terms in detail. Nor, at that time, was this necessary. Walther's objective was to transfer the right to call from the traditional ecclesio-political hierarchy back to the membership of the congregation. To this end, he emphatically asserted that the power of the keys belongs to all believers, and is partially delegated to the minister.

Holy Scripture represents the church, that is, the believers, as the bride of the Lord and as the mistress of the household to whom the keys have been entrusted and with them the right of and access to all the rooms, sacred things, and treasures of the house of God as well as the authority to appoint stewards over these. Every true Christian according to Holy Scripture is a spiritual priest and therefore empowered and called not only to use the means of grace for himself but also to impart them to those who as yet do not have them and therefore also do not yet possess with him the rights of the priesthood. However, since all possess these rights, no one may exalt himself over the others or exercise them over against the others, but in all places where Christians live together the rights of the priesthood are to be administered publicly in the name of the congregation by those who have been called by the church in the manner prescribed by God. ²

It was not Walther's intention or desire to change the practical, day-to-day functioning of the parish ministry. Walther was dealing with questions of church government and the source of the minister's authority to use the Keys. When he wrote that the *Predigtamt* "is the highest office in the church" (Thesis VII), for his purposes it mattered little how widely his readers defined that term. Whether they understood it to mean "parish pastoral ministry," or in a wider sense "the ministry of the Word," his thesis was clear and the battle lines with Grabau and the German *Kirchenordnungen* drawn. Likewise, whether the reader understood *Gemeinschaft* as "local congregation" or "the gathering of believers," he saw that Walther was removing the authority to call from the clergy (Grabau) and the princes and city councils (Loehe).

These distinctions were not addressed directly because Walther was defending the practice of Missouri's congregations as it then existed. This bitter debate was not over theological abstractions. It concerned Missouri's ministry to souls arbitrarily excommunicated by pastors in Buffalo. It concerned, in fact, the very legitimacy of the ministerium in the Missouri Synod. When one is defending the legitimacy of the ministry that exists, one does not waste time defending forms of ministry that do not exist and have not for centuries, or forms of ministry (e.g. parochial school teacher) which are not under attack. The status controversiae was something like "Is a call to the ministry issued directly by the members of a congregation valid?" The particular form of that ministry matters little when your opponents deny your claim to any ministry at all.

So to the question often asked in former Synodical Conference circles, "Did Walther mean to establish the local congregation and the pastoral ministry as the only forms of real church and divine ministry," the writer must answer "No." I

² C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*. Trans. J.T. Mueller. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987, pp. 268-269.

doubt he ever gave the matter much thought, but simply assumed that other offices were also a legitimate part of the public ministry. If he'd intended his *Kirche und Amt* to be an exhaustive treatise on the subject, he would certainly have mentioned the role of the seminary professor (he was one, after all), missionary, school teacher, and so forth. Instead, he wrote in the preface to the 1852 (First) edition of *Kirche und Amt*:

It was, of course, not our intention to present the doctrines of the church and the ministry in their completeness. Whoever desires this will find such a presentation in the larger dogmatic works of the teachers of our church, among others, especially in the master works of men like Chemnitz and Gerhard. It was our purpose to stress only those points concerning which there prevails a difference and to embody only so much uncontested material as is demanded by the context . . . we declare expressly that in this monograph we are concerned . . . [about] the principles according to which its [the church's] manifestations [Erscheinungen] are to be judged and on which its polity [Verfassung] is to rest. ³

In fact, in places Walther indicates that there are other forms of the *Predigtamt* than the parish ministry. For example, he writes disparagingly:

Of course, when the Buffalo Synod speaks of the holy ministry, it does not understand the office as such, or the communicated Gospel, but always the parish ministry, or the ministry insofar as pastors occupy it. ⁴

He also quotes Luther with approval when he says:

I mean the state [in contrast to the "spiritual estate" claimed by the Romans] that has the office of preaching and the ministry of the Word and sacraments. This imparts the Spirit and salvation, which no chanting and pomp can secure, such as that of pastors (Pfarramt), teachers, preachers, readers, priests (as we call the chaplains), sacristans, school teachers, and whoever else belongs to such offices and personnel. This state Scripture indeed praises and extols very highly. But it is true that God himself has established and instituted this spiritual state with his own blood and death, it is evident that He wants it to be honored highly and that He will not let it perish or cease, but He will preserve it until Judgment Day. ⁵

³ Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 9.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 32.

Professor Lawrenz therefore says:

It is significant that Walther offers also this quotation as he supplies support from Luther's writings for Thesis I [sic--the quotation is actually used with Thesis II on the Ministry]. Here Luther uses *Pfarramt* as a species of the genus public ministry. This gives us reason to conclude that Walther was not unaware of Luther's understanding of the wide scope of the public ministry nor in disagreement with it. ⁶

Walther does, in his discussion of Thesis II, address this distinction:

Augsburg Confession: "That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted" (Art. V; *Triglote*, p. 45).

This statement, of course, does not speak of the ministry of the Word *in concreto* or of the pastoral office but only of the ministry of the word *in abstracto*, of which Ludwig Hartmann, among others, reminds us in his pastoral theology: "The ministry of the Word may be treated in two ways: first, in an abstract way when the state or office is being considered, as Art. V of the Augsburg Confession treats it; second, in a concrete way, when the persons are considered who minister in this holy office, as Art. XIV of the Augsburg Confession treats it" . . . Therefore also the *Formula of Concord* says: "Ministerium ecclesiasticum, hoc est, verbum Dei praedicatum et auditum" (the ministry of the church, that is, the Word, preached and heard; *Thorough Declaration*, Art. XII, par. 30; *Triglote*, p. 1100). ⁷

If one is not careful in his reading, it is easy at times to believe that Walther used *Pfarramt* and *Predigtamt* interchangeably and identified the public ministry *in abstracto* with the pastoral ministry. This he did not intend. At times he does speak of the abstract "public ministry" by using the concrete term *Pfarramt*, just as Luther does. The reason for this is obvious. Walther was not defending an abstract principle, but the actual practice of Missouri congregations in the calling of their pastors. This mixing of terminology is understandable, yet one could wish for more exactness on Walther's part.

⁵ Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 180.

⁶ Carl Lawrenz, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (Spring, 1982), pp. 126-127).

⁷ Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 178.

Much the same thing might be said when Walther speaks of the church. One must remember that Grabau and Loehe were not attacking the right of a synod, but the rights of the congregation to call and ordain ministers. So, of course, Walther defends the status of the congregation as a visible church with the power of the keys. The status controversiae he was dealing with was something like "Is the local congregation a visible church with the power of the keys?" Those who would have Walther say that only the local congregation has the keys have to be very selective. For Theses VI and VII on the church and his development of them he says:

In an improper sense Scripture also calls the visible aggregate of all the called, that is, of all who confess and adhere to the proclaimed Word and use the holy sacraments, which consists of good and evil [persons], "church; so also it calls its several divisions, that is, the congregations that are here and there . . . "churches." ⁸

As visible congregations . . . bear the name "church" . . . ⁹

But that the name "church" is also applied to the entire visible assembly that has the Word and the sacraments, not by mistake but rightly, indeed, that it should bear this name, Holy Scripture too shows us. ¹⁰

When we speak of its outward fellowship, the church on earth is the assembly that hears, believes, and confesses the true doctrine of the Gospel of Christ and has the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies it and works in it by the word and the sacraments. ¹¹

Whatever those do in the church (whether they preach, administer the sacraments, *elect and ordain ministers of the Word*, etc.) who refuse to believe and so are not members of the [true] church and therefore have no right to administer the office of the keys, yet they do this as ministers or delegates of the church, that is, of the true believers. ¹² (emphasis added)

⁸ *ibid*, p. 20.

⁹ *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 78.

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 82. (Citation of Luther)

¹² *ibid*, p. 88.

Christ says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). But where thus Christ is, there, according to His promise, is the church. The apostle Paul calls the Christian family of a house a "church" (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philemon 2). Since, however, two persons, namely man and wife, constitute a family, they also constitute a church.¹³ (Citation of Gerhard)

It is clear from his citation of these men that Walther did not conceive of the local congregation as the only manifestation of the visible church. In Walther's own words (the second last quotation above) he acknowledges that the Apology speaks of Roman bishops, appointed by Rome, who have the power of the keys and thus can elect and ordain ministers. He speaks of congregations as divisions of the visible church. His point was that the local congregation is one of several possible manifestations of the visible church, and as such had just as much claim to the keys as any other manifestation.

We can glean additional insight from Missouri's first (1846) constitution. Franz Pieper and others later built their arguments that Synod is not church on the clause which speaks of the Synod as a purely advisory body. However, this isn't quite the whole story.

A system of visitation and supervision provided for in the constitution of 1846 shows how widely the principle of congregational supremacy as advocated by the Missourians differed from the congregationalism established in the Congregational and Baptist societies of America. Power to execute the Missouri system was vested in the President. According to a definite set of regulations the President is to visit every congregation belonging to Synod at least once every three years. He is to supervise the doctrine and life of the pastors and parish schoolteachers as well as the public administration of their office. If a pastor after repeated admonitions refuses to desist from proclaiming false doctrine, or if he clings to an immoral way of living, the President must report the facts to the assembled Synod, which in turn must make a last concerted effort to win the sinner from the error of his way. If the Synod is unsuccessful, the pastor in question must be expelled from membership in the Synod, and-- here the Missouri system differs from that of other Lutheran synods in America--his congregation must deal with him on the

¹³ *ibid*, p. 98.

basis of Matt. 18:17-20 and, if necessary, excommunicate him. The right to depose a pastor from office remains definitely in the hands of the congregation.

In addition to the supervision and control . . . [of] the pastors and teachers of parish schools, the constitution provides for a rather rigid control over the congregations. The president is to visit every congregation at least once every term of office [3 years]. In the course of this visit he is to examine the spiritual condition of the congregation. Is the congregation using an orthodox form of worship in its public services? Are the hymnbooks in agreement with the Confessional Writings of the Lutheran Church? Is there anything in the schoolbooks that offends against the Word of God? Are all the provisions in the constitution of the congregation in agreement with Lutheran doctrine? Are all the children properly baptized? Are all the children of confirmation age confirmed? Is the Bible and devotional literature read in the homes? ¹⁴

It is evident that the procedure for disciplining an erring pastor is that of Matt. 18, right down to the last step, "tell it to the church," "report the facts to the assembled Synod." The congregation is not "advised" to deal with its pastor--it "must." Although the Synod obviously could not claim the power to depose a pastor others have called, yet the expulsion from synodical membership represents an excommunication, and the requirement for congregational action is the insistence of a church that another church honor its excommunication.

The point here is that when a synod speaks with the authority of the Word, as when it addresses false doctrine, its decisions are *ipso facto* binding on all Christians and Christian congregations. The reason for this is clear--in such a case it is not the synod speaking, but the Word speaking through the synod. This truth is carried out in this constitution, drawn up under Walther's auspices. It is only in matters of adiaphora, such as whether the congregation shall exercise its right to call for itself or delegate this responsibility to others, such as synodical officials, that the synod was considered purely an advisory body.

¹⁴ Carl S. Munding, *Government in the Missouri Synod*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947, pp. 185-186.

In addition, are the president's prerogatives spelled out above those of an office which is not the public ministry? Supervision of doctrine and practice is clearly part and parcel of the ministry of the Word. The items about which the President is to inquire (and make a full report to the assembled Synod) are matters of pastoral concern. The office of synodical president is clearly not seen as a human institution of a human organization, but as an office of the public ministry fully authorized to use the power of the keys on behalf of those who established it and called a man into it.

After the questions with Buffalo and Iowa were laid to rest, Walther did not write much more concerning the question of Church and Ministry. It was settled (in Missouri) that the local congregation did have the right to elect and ordain ministers, and did not need any ecclesiastical hierarchy to do so. It was also understood that the Synod also had the use of the keys through its president.

The Synod also had the right to extend the divine call to college professors. As Walther himself preached at the installation of two professors at a Missouri Synod worker training school:

God has actually instituted only one office, namely the office, in his name to gather his church on earth, to rule over it, provide for it, and preserve it . . . now this office accordingly has such a sphere of duties and tasks of such a diverse variety . . . that no man is in a position, even in a small sphere, to fulfill all its tasks . . . The office of the church falls into the most diverse offices . . . It is therefore not a human arrangement, that there are men in the church, who train and instruct young boys so that they may some day carry out the office which preaches reconciliation. Their office is indeed a holy, godly office, a branch of the office which Christ instituted and established in presenting the keys of heaven . . . [The gifts needed to teach prepare young men for the ministry] are gifts of the Holy Spirit, which the Savior who ascended to heaven has poured out upon his church for the establishment and preservation of holy offices. This is why it says: "When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men . . . It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people

for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up . . . [he assured the two men that they] were not stepping out of a spiritual office into a secular one, out of a divine office into a human one . . . Not only is it a divine institution, but all its tasks have no other goal, no other final objective, than the glorification of God's name and the salvation of lost souls . . . Not only are particularly you, esteemed Director, from now on in the real sense the guardian, the spiritual father and house pastor of the boys and young men in our college; not only are they in a real sense a house church and house congregation of precious, immortal souls . . . laid as a trust upon your soul from this day on. ¹⁵

Here Missouri's position on Church and Ministry remained for many years.

Even Franz Pieper, who would later be a strong proponent of what came to be known as the "Missouri position" on church and ministry, spoke of church bodies (Synods churches in the aftermath of the election controversy.

But now there actually exist many heterodox churches [irrglaubiger Kirchen], that is, such church bodies [Gemeinschaften] which do not in all parts remain with the truth which God has revealed. ¹⁶

Thesis III--It is, therefore, not a matter of indifference which church group [kirchliche Gemeinschaft] a Christian joins; but he has God's earnest command strictly to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox churches [Kirchen], and, avoiding all church fellowship [kirchlichen Gemeinschaft] with the heterodox, to adhere only to the orthodox church [Kirche]. ¹⁷

Thus we are ridiculed in the General Synod, yes, even in the Council, because we make a strict distinction between orthodox and heterodox churches [Gemeinschaften]. ¹⁸

Also within the Lutheran Church [Kirche] one meets people who, although they still belong to it, nevertheless look upon their Church [Kirche] as a kind of second-class church, because they have a great respect for the outward prestige of the sectarian churches [Sectenkirchen]. The Lutherans in the General Synod, and in part, also those in the Council, consider themselves honored when they are treated by sectarian churches as a

¹⁵ C.F.W. Walther, *Lutherische Brosamen*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897, pp. 346-352. Translated and quoted by Lawrenz, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129.

¹⁶ Franz Pieper, "The Difference Between Heterodox and Orthodox Churches." *Verhandlungen des Sudlichen Districts der Synode von Missouri, Ohio, u. a. St. 1889*, p. 22. (Translated by E. L. Mehlberg in booklet form. Coos Bay, OR: St. Paul's Lutheran Church, 1982, p. 19.)

¹⁷ *ibid*, p. 25 (p. 21).

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 26 (p. 23).

"Denomination" of equal rank. Whether the sects recognize us or not, we should not think of ourselves as a second-class church [Kirche].¹⁹

In this paper, it is clear that Pieper is referring to the Missouri Synod, General Synod, General Council, and the Reformed denominations as churches. For these groups he uses the terms *Gemeinschaft* or *kirchliche Gemeinschaft*. When he speaks of a local congregation, he uses *Gemeinde*.

Yet by the end of his career, he had written in his Dogmatics:

The formation of Christian congregations, and membership in them, is not a human, but a divine mandate . . . On the other hand, the union of congregations into larger church bodies, such as conferences, synods, etc., has not been ordained by God.²⁰

In this article [Nature of the Public Ministry] we are speaking of the public ministry in the narrower sense, that is, of the office by which the means of grace, given originally to the Christians as their inalienable possession, are administered by order and on behalf of Christians.

The ministry in this sense presupposes Christian congregations. Only a congregation can establish the public ministry . . . This is scriptural. Only after the mission work on Crete had resulted in congregations did Paul command Titus (Titus 1:5) to ordain elders "in every city," in the cities where there were congregations, which elders, or presbyters, he then called bishops . . . That the public ministry presupposes congregations is evident also from the fact that Scripture mentions entire congregations and every member of them as coming under the care of this office . . . Where there are no Christian congregations, as in a pagan country, there can be no public ministry, no public service in the name of the congregation. But as soon as the missionary activity has come into existence, the public ministry can be established.²¹

If this is the case, one wonders in what sense Pieper can call a Synod a Kirche. It does not have the authority to establish the public ministry, and *ipso facto* does not have the power of the keys. Yet also in his Dogmatics he says:

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 48 (p. 47).

²⁰ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*. St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953, Vol. III, p. 422.

²¹ *ibid*, pp. 439-440.

A congregation or church body which abides by God's order, in which therefore God's Word is taught in its purity and the Sacraments administered according to the divine institution, is properly called an orthodox church (*ecclesia orthodoxa, pura*).²² If Pieper really meant that, he has invented a new meaning for "church,"

which would be a gathering which has the marks of the church, and therefore has in its midst some Christians, yet does not have the power of the keys. It seems as if Pieper is caught up in trying to establish Missouri's congregational church polity as commanded by Scripture, instead of allowed by Scripture. In doing so, he muddles and confuses his own terminology. In fact, conceiving of a church which does not have the power of the keys would be heretical.

The author doubts Pieper thought in these terms. I believe that his use of *Kirche* rather demonstrates that he is careless in defining and using his terms. Indeed, if a Synod is not church and does not have the power of the keys, i.e. the power to preach the Gospel, can it be called heretical or heterodox? How can it be accused of misusing what it does not have? If it has the marks of the church, Word and Sacrament, and can therefore be accused of misusing them, is it not church?

Notice that Pieper has gone beyond where Walther was. Walther could say of professors at a worker training college, called not by the congregation but by the Synod, "Their office is indeed a holy, godly office, a branch of the office which Christ instituted and established in presenting the keys of heaven." He could call the students at the school a "house church," and the director their "pastor." Notice also that Pieper has changed Walther's *Gemeinschaft in Kirche und Amt* into *Gemeinde*.

²² *ibid*, p. 422.

In fact, it can be rightly said that where Walther widened the definition especially of the church, and also of the ministry, Pieper narrows it. Walther did not say that the German consistories were an invalid vehicle for establishing the public ministry. They did, for example, have the power to assign additional manpower to a growing congregation without consulting with the congregation. (One suspects this might have been different if the congregation was also expected to pay the salary.) But Pieper is on thin ice in this area. He says, "

Individual persons and boards [and presumably Synods] can indeed extend a divine call, but only when they are commissioned to do so by those whose the power originally (*principaliter et immediate*) is, or when these have, at least, given their silent consent. ²³

Here Pieper made the concession that was necessary if he did not want to repudiate the practice of the Lutheran church since its birth. But his last clause really vitiates his entire argument. If the congregations of a Synod, by agreeing to a constitution, grant certain powers to the Synod and authorize the larger body to make certain decisions on their behalf, this is entirely legitimate, Pieper says. In fact, tacit consent (lack of grumbling? lack of official protest? remaining a member of the Synod?) is enough. The only way Pieper was able to reconcile the idea that Synod is not church with the practice of centuries in Germany was to grant an exception a Synod could drive a whole herd of horses through. They could, presumably, keep controversial decisions rather secret and, appealing to "tacit consent," claim they have the authority of the church to do more or less as they please.

Perhaps the final stage of the direction Pieper took on the question of Church and Ministry was represented by P. E. Kretzmann.

The PUBLIC exercise of the rights and duties of the spiritual priesthood, the COMMON WORK IN THE NAME OF ALL (AUSUEBUNG DES

²³ *ibid*, p. 452.

AMTS VON GEMEINSCHAFTS WEGEN), is, according to the Word of God, vested in the Christian congregation, as the unit in the so-called visible church. The power is so vested on the basis of the fact that the invisible Church is present where the means of grace are in use, even if the number of believers (of the persons professing the Christian faith in that particular locality) should amount to only two or three. ²⁴

In the passage from Ephesians [4:11] it is significant that the first three names must be eliminated for our purpose, since they clearly refer to offices in the APOSTOLIC CHURCH. With regard to the pastors and teachers mentioned, Doctor Stoeckhardt writes: "With 'pastors' and 'teachers' the apostle describes the regular ministry of the Word, which in all periods of the Church has been and remained the same, the PUBLIC OFFICE OF PREACHING." . . . In none of these passages is any auxiliary office named as existing by divine institution . . . It is clear, then according to the Bible, that the call, properly speaking, refers to the entire office of the ministry and includes all its functions . . . Luther writes: "If one is invested with the office of the Word, he is also invested with all the offices which through the Word are performed in the churches, that is: the power to baptize, to bless, to loose and to bind, to pray, and to judge or condemn." ²⁵

There is still another meaning of "call" found in the New Testament, namely that which applies the word to the station or position of a person in life, regardless of any connection with the work of the Church . . . Based upon this usage of the term, and connecting it with the specific significance spoken of above, a new meaning of the word "call" has been introduced into the Church, namely that which connects it . . . with all the auxiliary offices of the ministry, or with the functions which they perform . . . In this sense we have a purely ecclesiastical usage [of the term "call"], namely that we speak of "calling a teacher," "calling a professor," "calling an assistant pastor," etc. It is in this sense that Luther writes . . . "The ten elders shall, in the name of our common congregational assembly, have the power and command TO CALL, INSTALL, and dismiss A SCHOOLMASTER for the young boys." ²⁶

Throughout this paper, Kretzmann carefully denies everyone except a senior pastor a call in the scriptural sense of the term, including professors, missionaries, assistant pastors, teachers, et al. He has also gone far enough to

²⁴ P. E. Kretzmann, *The Doctrine of the Call With Special Reference to the Auxiliary Offices in the Church*. Paper delivered to the 1934 Convention of the Northern Nebraska District of the Missouri Synod at Arlington, NE, p. 3.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 6.

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 7.

call the local congregation the unit of the visible church. Once again, notice that Kretzmann is far away from where Walther was. He is even distanced from Pieper, who at least applied the term Kirche to larger church bodies such as synods. He deals with Luther's statements on the call extended to teachers by making a distinction in the use of the word "call" which, to the best of the author's knowledge, was never made by Walther, Pieper, or Luther. He also reads the functions of the modern parish pastor back two thousand years into the time of the New Testament church, thereby giving the particular functions of this office divine mandate, instead of divine permission.

J.P. Koehler, in his comments on the eruption of the Church and Ministry question in the Synodical Conference, said that "It was again revealed that linguistic and historical incompetence, not only in exegetical but dogmatical work as well, will unnecessarily precipitate doctrinal controversy."²⁷ It was this statement of Koehler's, in fact, which prompted the writer to take up the subject at hand. For it is a very serious charge, especially when he later quotes Adolf Hoenecke as saying about the Missouri Synod in the Election Controversy, "They have something sectarian about them,"²⁸ which Koehler interprets to mean that they had an air of superiority or a proud desire to be the most orthodox. But after his study, the author agrees at least with the thrust of Koehler's comments (that bit about "unnecessarily," however, I'll leave alone). In Pieper and Kretzmann the author discerns a desire to make a distinctive part of Missouri's synodical polity--the Synod's "purely advisory" status--something mandated by Scripture. In doing so and following that position

²⁷ J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*. Tr. Albert Maier. Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Co., 1981, p. 230.

²⁸ *ibid*, p. 251.

to its end, they not only wind up contradicting Walther, whose constitution it was. They also make this type of church polity into something of a ceremonial rule. They must attempt to deny the Synod its rightful status as a church with the power of the keys, and yet as an organization which has the power of the keys when it takes a stand against heresy in its own congregations or in other bodies.

This untenable distinction could not be long maintained. This, in the author's opinion, contributed to Missouri's fall from orthodoxy. If the Synod is not church, it cannot effectively discipline. If its officials and professors are not in the public ministry as ordained by God, how can they go head-to-head with another on the basis of the keys, i.e. the Word? Under these conditions, the only tools available for dealing with false doctrine are the Synod's constitutional procedures and bylaws.

Many have said that the politicking that has marked the doctrinal conflict in Missouri for decades has obscured the real issues at stake. This is true, but also to a large degree was inevitable. Although lip service was always paid to the idea that when Synod speaks on the basis of Scripture, it speaks authoritatively, nevertheless it was not a living part of Missouri's image of herself. She was the bulwark of orthodoxy; in the Confessions, Walther, and Pieper she had a wall against false teaching that could not crumble.

Missouri's inability to discipline her men in the late '30's and '40's was, in fact, an outgrowth of a theology that failed to renew itself at the well of Scripture. Walther's insights into the Scripture were sound, but his work alone was not enough to clear away centuries of practice which did not reflect the scriptural truths concerning church and ministry at all well. His work should have been a starting place for others to follow, to go to Scripture armed with his insights and build on them.

That this did not happen in Missouri was, in part, due to Walther's influence. Although he did it for a very specific reason, as we have seen, Walther's appeals to the fathers set an unfortunate example. It was a good way to deal with the situation in the mid-1800's, but Walther's greatness led his successors to consider this the way to learn and develop doctrine. This was, in fact, as much the reason as anything else that Missouri's theological leaders were dogmaticians, and did little in the area of serious exegesis.

That the heritage of Walther could have been a great thing for Missouri is plainly evident in the fruits of the Wauwatosa Gospel in our own Synod. Koehler and August Pieper were just as much Walther's children as was Franz, yet the difference between Wauwatosa and St. Louis in the opening decades of the twentieth century is astounding. Missouri sought to protect herself from popish tendencies in synodical officials by denying them the divine call. In Wauwatosa, Koehler wrote *Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns* and A. Pieper *Menschenherrschaft in der Kirche*, seeking the same protection by seeing the problem as the use of legal forms where the Gospel should prevail. By such means, as well as Wisconsin's lack of Walther's legacy at the head of the Synod, Wisconsin's practice has always been what Missouri sought in her dogmatic formulations. Missouri, on the other hand, has seen her leaders raise synodical politicking and centralization to an art form.

Currently our synod is seeing another dimension of the doctrine of church and ministry come increasingly to the fore. That is the concept of "lay ministry." If we wish to learn from the history of this doctrine, we will seek to avoid the mistakes made by the three men of Missouri. In this area, it seems, imprecise use of terminology, or terminology that is not explicitly defined, can wreak havoc.

At least now, in May of 1989, the author sees "lay ministry" as just such a term. It is both a contradictory and a very ill-defined term. Is lay ministry simply the exercise of the universal priesthood, or is it public service in the church by those who have not attended a worker training school? If it is the former, then all people are "lay ministers," including pastors at least part of the time (e.g. at home with their families). Furthermore, many things that are done by "laymen" don't fit in the category, such as elders, lay synodical board members, Sunday School teachers. With this definition, the term excludes what it is usually meant to include (much of the service done by "non-professional types"), and includes what it is often understood to exclude (some of the things a pastor does with the Bible).

If, on the other hand, "lay ministry" is public service in the church and does not encompass the ministry of a pastor or teacher, it is dangerously contradictory and confusing. Understood in this way, there is no such thing as "lay ministry." It is not his education, his salary, or the scope of his call that separates the pastor or teacher from the "laymen." It is the fact that he has a call from universal priests to exercise the keys in their behalf. A Sunday school teacher, elder, or what have you also exercises the keys on behalf of priests. When they function in these offices, "lay ministers" aren't laypeople at all--they are divinely called public servants of the congregation. If what the pastor or teacher does is just "ministry," and what the other folks do is "lay ministry," we are in fact sneaking our own version of Kretzmann's concept of auxiliary offices in the back door.

It seems that the last 15 centuries' worth of practice is still spooking around in the WELS. The fact that we have no theological vocabulary which describes the majority of our public ministers would indicate that.

If we wish to continue the unfinished task of freeing the public ministry from the stereotypes which have clung to it for centuries, we must, I believe, learn how to speak much more clearly and scripturally about it. Our doctrinal position, as spelled out by Walther and clarified especially by August Pieper, stands affirmed in our practice and understanding of all our full-time, synodically trained workers, be they Synod officials, pastors or teachers. But when we speak about our more numerous, non-synodically-trained public ministers, our language does not do justice to our scriptural theology. If we wish to avoid a late twenty-first century church history paper on "How the Walther, Pieper-Koehler Understanding of the Public Ministry was Muddled in the WELS," we have some work to do.

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