

The Doctrine of the Church and Ministry

[This article appeared in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, Vol. 73, No. 1 (January 1976), 9-22.]

by Heinrich Vogel

I. The Church

In ecclesiastical usage the term “church” is used in a twofold sense. In the strict sense of the word (*ecclesia stricte dicta*) it refers to the communion of saints, the entire number of believers whom the Holy Ghost has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior and whom he has through this gracious gift of a common faith intimately joined together to form one “congregation” (AC VII, VIII), one body, one blessed fellowship. In a broader sense of the word (*ecclesia late dicta*) the church is any group of professing Christians large or small, consisting of or containing such members of the body of Christ. The former is often referred to as the *Una Sancta*, the one holy Christian church, the universal Christian church, which has no limits of time or space, and embraces all believers that ever lived or ever will live. The latter is a term used to designate gatherings of Christians who by their profession of faith are recognizable as believers and who seek the fellowship of other believers.

1. The essence of the church

None of these definitions is found *ipsis verbis* in holy Scripture. The Bible does not bother to define terms but usually speaks of theological subjects in a matter-of-fact way, simply assuming their existence and describing rather than defining them. This is the case with the term “church” also. There are 115 occurrences of the word *ἐκκλησία* in the New Testament, most of which refer to the church of Christ in one way or another, but none of which actually defines the term. A careful examination of these passages, however, soon shows that the church consists of sanctified believers in Christ. In the second chapter of the book of Acts, where the founding of the Christian church is described, we read, “They that gladly received the word were baptized...and they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:41-42). A few verses farther on Luke says, “The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). In the address of many of St. Paul’s epistles he refers to the recipients of his letters as “saints.” For example, the first epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians is addressed “unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

From descriptions such as these it is not difficult to derive a suitable definition of the term “church” as it is used in the New Testament. The church consists of people who “have received the word and were baptized.” They are believers who are further described as using the Word and the sacraments, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” They practice their faith, congregate for public worship, pray, and practice Christian fellowship. They are for this reason often simply referred to as “saints,” that is, people who have been sanctified, or “such as should be saved.”

What makes the church what it is, the essential feature of the church, is simply this, that it consists of believers in Christ. In Scripture many expressions are used to refer to it. The one most frequently used is the “body of Christ” (Romans 12:4,5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12,13,27; Ephesians 1:22,23; 2:16; 4:12,16; 5:23; Colossians 1:18,24; 2:19). Other designations that are

used are “bride of Christ” (John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Revelation 19:7; 22:17), “pure virgin” (2 Corinthians 11:2), “members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Ephesians 5:30), “house of God” (1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17), “lively stones” (1 Peter 2:5), “a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5), “God’s building” (1 Corinthians 3:9), “a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:21), “temple of God” (1 Corinthians 3:16,17; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16), “Mount Zion, city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Psalms 46:4; 48:1,2; 87:3; Galatians 4:26; Hebrews 12:22; 11:10, 16), “a holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9,10; Titus 2:14), “people of God” (Psalms 110:3); “household of God” (Ephesians 2:19), and “(sheep)fold” (John 10:16). Indicating the close relation of the church to Christ, such expressions as “bride of Christ” (John 3:29; 2 Corinthians 11:2,3; Revelation 21:9), “the Lamb’s wife” (Revelation 21:9), and “Jerusalem which is above, which is the mother of us all” (Galatians 4:26) are also used.

Since the church is the communion of saints, the sum total of all believers, and since faith is something which we cannot perceive with our senses, it follows that the church is invisible to man. Whenever through the Word men are brought to faith in Christ, the Lord sets up his kingly rule in their hearts, and of this he says, “The kingdom of God cometh not with observation, neither shall they say: Lo here! or, to there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20,21). We can only detect its presence by the profession of faith which believers make. This does not mean that the church is a mere illusion, a platonic idea, or something imaginary. It is very real. In Christ’s high priestly prayer he speaks again and again of those whom the Father has given him (John 17:2,6,9,11,12). Jesus says of the believers, “I know whom I have chosen” (John 13:18). Paul reminds the Ephesians (1:4) that “he [God] hath chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” The existence of the church is clearly revealed in Scripture to our faith, but is not demonstrable by human sensual perception. It is an article of faith. By faith we know of the existence of the church, know its characteristics, its essence, and its purpose. Yet we are unable to determine definitely whether a given person is or is not a member of the church. This can be only assumed on the basis of the marks of the church.

Wherever the means of grace are in use, where the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered, there the church must be present, since these are the means whereby believers are brought to faith and are activities which only believers would have an interest in carrying on. For this reason the means of grace, the gospel and the sacraments, have been called the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*). Our Lord himself said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” It is therefore safe to assume that where the gospel is taught and the sacraments are administered, there must be believers, there the church must be present.

Because of sin and human weakness, the gospel is sometimes distorted, parts of it ignored or omitted, misinterpreted and misapplied. The sacraments too may be turned by some into sacrificial acts which man performs instead of sacramental rites in which God bestows a blessing on man. Because of the possibility of such distortions the church insists on the pure marks of the church (*notae purae ecclesiae*). The Lord taught his disciples to baptize all nations, “teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20).

The marks of the church do not render the invisible church visible; they merely indicate its presence among men who use the means of grace. In such a group there may be both believers and unbelievers, sincere Christians and hypocrites. It is still impossible for us to discern clearly who is and who is not a Christian in a group using the means of grace. In Christian love we assume that those who use the marks of the church, the means of grace, are believing Christians until they by word or deed prove themselves to be otherwise.

In spite of the possible admixture of insincere individuals or hypocrites, the group of believers who practice their faith by hearing the Word and using the sacraments is the church. They are the “communion of saints” which we confess in the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed. What binds them together is their common faith in their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In this faith they have become united by the activity of the Holy Ghost, who has first called them by the gospel, gathered them, enlightened them, and sanctified them, and kept them with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

2. The outward structure of the church

The Holy Spirit, who through the means of grace brings individuals to faith, also through the same means of grace draws believers together into groups, which will practice their faith together. When a believer in a given locality becomes aware of another believer in the same locality, they have something in common, their faith in Christ, which seeks outlets, which seeks opportunities to express itself. It is self-evident that these believers will want to express their faith to one another and to their fellowmen. For this reason they form a group of Christians which we also call a church or a congregation.

In the New Testament there are injunctions to gather in order to hear the Word such as Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” Christians are encouraged to assemble for this purpose in Hebrews 10:24,25: “Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another.” Many such admonitions are to be found in the various epistles. Yet the New Testament nowhere lays down regulations for the form which such gatherings are to assume. There are no ceremonial laws in the New Testament. The manner in which Christians congregate for worship purposes, for proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments, is left to their Christian liberty to arrange in the manner that is best suited to the circumstances under which they live.

The basic and simplest form of such a gathering of Christians has always been and still is the local congregation. A group of Christians which gathers in a given place to form a Christian congregation has the right, the opportunity, and the privilege of administering the ministry of the keys in every respect. It can establish worship services, call a pastor to serve it, can engage in mission work, can train workers for the church, can engage in benevolent and educational work, in short, it can function in any way a group of Christians needs to function in order to carry out the Lord’s great commission to spread the gospel among men.

But when the number of such congregations in a given area becomes greater, it soon becomes apparent that jointly they can do some of these things better than individually. The training of workers for the church is very difficult for a single congregation, no matter how large it becomes. The judicious planning and execution of a mission program is necessarily limited when a single congregation undertakes it. A larger group, fifty, a hundred, several hundred, or even thousands of congregations joining their efforts in these areas of activity can do the work more efficiently than single congregations.

For this reason Christians or congregations will unite with other Christians or congregations in larger groupings such as conferences, districts, synods, and federations to do some of the work of the church more expeditiously and effectively. Such larger groupings are also groups of Christians gathered about the Word of God and the sacraments, doing what any group of Christians feels constrained to do in order to spread the gospel of Christ. In this sense

such larger groupings of Christians are the church in exactly the same way as a smaller group of Christians forming a congregation is the church.

In actual practice the church often functions as a representative church, that is, it delegates authority, duties, work, programs, and activities to a small number of its members selected by various methods to expedite the work of the larger body. This is known in ecclesiastical terms as *ecclesia representativa*. In the early church there was a minimum of such organizational procedure, but even there its beginnings are detectable. In Acts 6:3-6 we read of the selection of the seven deacons of the church at Jerusalem chosen to administer the benevolent program of that congregation. In Acts 15 we have the first synodical convention, so to say, in the meeting of the leaders of the church at Antioch with the leaders of the church at Jerusalem to determine what shall be the practice of the church in regard to circumcision and the requirements of the Mosaic Law. In 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 we read of a collection which the apostle Paul and his associates gathered in the churches of Greece, Macedonia, and Asia Minor for the needy saints in Jerusalem. In these incidents we see the beginning of a cooperation among the Christians in different localities and among members of different local congregations which closely resembles the work done today by larger groupings of Christians in conferences, districts, or synods.

The same method is used in administering the affairs of a congregation in any locality. Here, too, it is often impossible and impractical to gather all the members of a congregation together to decide a given matter. This is often left to a representative group such as a voters' assembly, the church council, or a special committee to lay plans, devise procedures, and even to execute them in the name of the entire congregation. In a similar manner any larger body such as a synod, consisting of thousands of members scattered through large areas, must carry out its business by delegating the work to boards, committees, and officials chosen for this purpose and charged with their respective duties and responsibilities, which they carry out in the name of the entire body.

It is an interesting observation that in all the many references to the New Testament church in the books of the New Testament there is no directive for the outward form of the church. As a matter of fact, we know little or nothing about its outward form or organization. The form seems to have varied from time to time and from place to place. The establishment of congregations, the ordination and installation of pastors, the sending out of missionaries, the planning of mission programs, the benevolent program of the church – all these items seem sometimes to have been done in one manner, at other times in another. Whatever outward form the organization of the Christian church assumes in one century or another or in one country or another is often determined by the existing circumstances in that time and place. Even today the Christian church has different forms in a predominantly Christian and in a predominantly heathen country; in a democracy, a monarchy, or a dictatorship; in medieval times and in modern times. These outward forms are not essential. They are changeable. They vary. Yet they do not in any way affect the true essence of the church, nor need they interfere with its real work.

3. The work of the church

The Lord has given his church one task to perform in the world, to “go into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), or as St. Matthew (28:19-20) expresses it, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”

To equip his church for the accomplishment of this task the Lord gave it the keys of the kingdom of heaven, commonly known as the ministry of the keys. This power derives its name from three incidents in which the Lord conferred this power on his followers. In Matthew 16:19 he said to Simon Peter, who in the name of all the disciples had answered the question as to the Lord's real identity, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Lest we imagine that this power was bestowed on Peter to the exclusion of the other disciples, we read in Matthew 18:18 that the Lord told all his disciples, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth, shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." After his resurrection the Lord put this same assignment into slightly different words, which are only more explicit, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost; Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:22,23).

It is obvious from these quotations that the task of the church is to preach the gospel of Christ for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Actually the ministry of the keys is identical with the use of the means of grace. The preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments has as its purpose the conversion and saving of the sinner through the remission of his sins. This is the work which the Lord of the church has assigned to his church. In carrying out this task the church is merely continuing the work which Christ himself began on earth during his own public ministry.

Just as the Lord himself did not limit his ministry to any one outward form – he taught in the temple, in the synagogues, in the wilderness, in the cities and villages, wherever he found people willing to listen to him – so we too in the church are not bound to use any one form of proclaiming the gospel of Christ. This can be done in a variety of ways. The usual method is the public proclamation of the gospel message in a formal manner called preaching. This may not seem to some to be the most practical and effective manner of spreading the gospel, but it is the method used by our Lord himself and recommended, yes commanded, to his disciples. The one thing he did not tell them is how, when and where this preaching must be done. Again there are no forms of worship, no liturgical procedures, no ceremonial laws in the New Testament. Again we see that the method varied from time to time and from place to place. To the jailer at Philippi Paul preached in the prison where he was in custody (Acts 16:25-33). To Lydia of Thyatira he preached on a river bank at an outdoor service (Acts 16:13-15). To the Jews in the cities he visited on his missionary journeys he preached in the synagogues. Expelled from these he preached to the Gentiles, wherever he could find a group willing to listen to him – on one occasion on the Areopagus in Athens to the rulers of that great city. The New Testament church has no directive as to the form which the proclamation of the gospel must take. We are to preach the gospel "in season and out of season" wherever the opportunity presents itself. We use the spoken word, the printed word, radio and television, any form of communication that effectively gets the work done.

The authority for proclaiming the gospel is given to the church by the Lord himself. This authority he has given to the church in general, to each individual in the church, but to no one else. It follows that the church and the government have two entirely different tasks. Each has its own divinely bestowed responsibilities. Romans 13:1-7 points out in detail that the existing governments derive their authority from God, who has ordained them, who has given them certain powers designed for the protection of life, health, and property and has endowed the

government with the necessary power to carry out those tasks, including the power over the life and death of its citizens. It functions by force and governs in accordance with human reason.

In these respects it differs radically from the church, which is concerned not with the temporal or bodily welfare of the individual, but with his spiritual and eternal welfare. The church is not to employ force, but the power of God's Word in accomplishing its task of preparing man for eternal life.

Thus the church and the state have entirely different tasks, engage in entirely different activities, and function with entirely different means. Yet the Christian is at the same time a member of the church and a citizen of the state. As a Christian he operates with the God-given means of grace. As a citizen he utilizes the powers of the government for the protection of his person and property. This is no real conflict of interests as long as neither the church nor the state undertakes to interfere with the functions of the other. When the church undertakes to tell the state how to run its affairs, or when the state presumes to regulate the activity of the church, then harm comes to both.

4. Errors in the church

Although the church consists of believers, these believers are still sinners. By reason of sin errors have infiltrated the church from earliest times. In apostolic times there was Gnosticism, presuming to have a knowledge superior to God's Word. In the fourth century Arianism denied the deity of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit. In spite of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, which emphasized the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and thereby the deity of the Son and the Spirit, there are still those today who deny the Trinity and espouse a Unitarian theology. In the Roman church work righteousness all but caused the gospel of salvation by grace through faith to be forgotten until Martin Luther restored it to its rightful place in theology in the Reformation.

Thus many churches to this day espouse errors which are unbiblical and anti-scriptural. They are either the result of man's attempt to understand with his own little mind the unsearchable ways of God which he has not seen fit fully to reveal, or they are the result of the refusal to accept what God has revealed, because man's mind thinks or would like to think otherwise for various reasons.

To the degree that a church body teaches contrary to Scripture, that church is heterodox, an erring church body. Some churches cling to one or two errors, such as refusing infant baptism, denying the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar, teaching some form of synergism instead of free salvation by grace alone, and otherwise profess to believe, teach, and confess as Scripture teaches. Others are shot through with many errors, having departed so far from scriptural truth that their resemblance to a Christian church is hardly perceptible and their teachings can hardly be distinguished from non-Christian teachings. There have been times in the history of the church when the entire church had become heterodox. In Luther's time the church of Rome as well as the Eastern orthodox church had lost sight of the basic gospel truths and were teaching a shallow morality and work righteousness to their members.

Yet the Lord has promised that the gates of hell itself shall not prevail against his church (Matthew 16:18). He always sees to it that the truth is rediscovered, reemphasized, and again taught and confessed. Scriptural truth may be obscured and forgotten for a time, it may be ignored and denied, but it will always assert itself again as someone searching the Scriptures discovers it revealed there.

Also in a heterodox church there may still be and often are true Christians. Some may not agree with their erring teachers and maintain a simple, childlike faith on the basis of their reading and study of holy Scripture with an open mind. Then there are always the baptized children who have not yet been corrupted with the false teachings of the church. In such a situation, the Lord knows them that are his.

There is only one way to determine whether a church is orthodox or heterodox. Its teachings, its doctrine, its practice must be compared with holy Scripture. If they agree with Scripture it is orthodox. If not, it is heterodox. Every Christian should therefore try the spirits, whether they are of God (1 John 4:1). Every Christian should affiliate with a church, with other believers who believe and teach what Scripture teaches.

This poses a practical problem of church fellowship. What is a Christian to do when the Christians with whom he is affiliated espouse a false doctrine or engage in false practice? Or what is a Christian to do when he comes into a new environment and wishes to affiliate with one of the existing churches? In both cases he should carefully ascertain what errors, if any, are taught in the churches which are represented in his area and affiliate with the one which teaches as God's Word teaches. If error enters into a church body with which one is already affiliated, the Christian's responsibility is first of all to testify against such error in an effort to eliminate it. Failing of that, the Christian must eventually disassociate himself from such erring brethren as the strongest and final testimony against the error they embrace. This must not be done in a loveless and hasty manner, however, but only after patient testimony and instruction, lest the church be torn apart by schism.

II. The Ministerial Office

In order to perpetuate the teaching and preaching of God's Word in the church and to administer the sacraments as they were instituted by Christ himself, the Lord has instituted the office of the holy ministry, the ministry of the gospel, often simply called the ministerial office.

1. The essence of the ministerial office

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted this office when he commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). In the New Testament it is called an office (Romans 11:13), a ministry (Acts 1:17,25; 20:24; 21:19; 2 Corinthians 6:3; Ephesians 4:12; Colossians 4:17; 1 Timothy 1:12; 2 Timothy 4:5,11), the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4), the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18), ministration of the spirit (2 Corinthians 3:8), ministration of righteousness (2 Corinthians 3:9), service (Romans 15:31), and administration (1 Corinthians 12:5).

The Lord expects all believers to confess him before men (Matthew 10:32). The office of the ministry has thus been given to the church, to each member individually, and to all members collectively, not only in theory, but for practice. The office may be discharged privately or publicly.

From the beginning of the Christian church there were men especially appointed to discharge the duties of the ministry publicly in behalf of others. Examples of such public ministers of the Word are the apostles sent out by the Lord himself and men like Titus and other assistants of the apostle Paul whom he left in charge of supplying areas such as Crete and others with pastors by "ordaining elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). God is a God of order and wants the affairs of his church conducted in an orderly manner (1 Corinthians 14:40). St. Paul commends

the Christians at Colosse for their orderliness, “I am with you in the spirit, joying and beholding your order, and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ” (Colossians 2:5).

2. The form of the ministerial office

Christians are not all equally qualified to perform publicly the functions of the ministry, however. Some have been given one gift, others another. The gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon believers vary greatly and differ one from the other. Thus St. Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do so with simplicity; he that ruleth with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:6-8). To the Corinthians St. Paul wrote, “There are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all” (1 Corinthians 12:5-6). To the Ephesians he wrote, “But to every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ... And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:7,11,12).

From the passages such as these just cited we conclude that the office of the public ministry differs in form according to the needs of the church at a given time and place. The various forms mentioned in Ephesians 4 differ from those enumerated in 1 Corinthians 12:28, “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.” Although a number of forms of the public ministry are mentioned, there is no attempt made anywhere in the New Testament to define or accurately to describe the functions of these various forms.

3. The qualifications for the ministerial office

There are qualifications specified for those who are to be placed into this ministry. To Timothy St. Paul wrote,

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity...not a novice... moreover he must have a good report of them which are without. (1 Timothy 3:2-7)

Similar qualifications are listed in Titus 1:6-9,

If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

Today we also do not promiscuously place just anyone into the ministry, but subject those who are willing to serve in this capacity to long and thorough training, thus making sure not only that they are well versed in holy Scripture, but also that they possess those qualities outlined by the apostle Paul as requisite for the successful administration of this important office. They must be above reproach and apt to teach others, if they are to accomplish what this office requires of them.

4. The purpose of the public ministry

The ultimate purpose of the Christian ministry is, of course, the glorification of God. He has instituted it for the purpose of applying the means of grace to sinful men to save them from perdition. Every soul thus saved redounds to the glory of the God who wrought its salvation.

As far as the church is concerned, the public ministry serves for the edification of the church. Through the exercise of the ministry of the Word sinners are brought to repentance and faith and thus become children of God, heirs of eternal life. Thus the church of Christ grows from generation to generation as more and more are added to those who believe and are saved.

Mindful of this fact ministers, recognizing their great responsibility, should discharge their office to the best of their ability, as St. Paul admonishes Timothy,

Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee. (1 Timothy 4:12-16)

Peter, too, exhorts the elders of the church, “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

By the same token the church should bend every effort to train its future ministers as thoroughly as possible. The apostle Paul warned Timothy, “Lay hands suddenly on no man” (1 Timothy 5:22). In order to perpetuate the office of the ministry he further exhorted Timothy, “The things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also “ (2 Timothy 2:2).

5. The call into the ministry

No one should assume the functions of the public ministry except through a legitimate call from the Lord through a group of Christians. The great prophets of Old Testament times were not self-appointed leaders of their people, but were called by God, often directly, often against their own will and inclination to be prophets of God. The apostles too were chosen by the Lord personally to be his disciples and ministers of the Word. Similarly the ministers in the New Testament church are placed into the ministry by the church, which trains them, equips them for the work, and then extends a call to them, placing them into a specific phase of the work of the ministry. Paul asks in Romans 10:15, “How shall they preach, except they be sent?” In the epistle to the Hebrews we read, “No man taketh this honor unto himself, but he that is called of

God, as was Aaron” (Hebrews 5:4). Since all Christians are brethren and the minister represents them in the discharge of common duties they all have, it is obvious that these Christians will formally call him to discharge these duties for them. Thus, for example, Paul and Barnabas were called by the congregation at Antioch to go to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders about the question of circumcision. Similarly, the church at Antioch separated Paul and Barnabas for the work of carrying the gospel into Asia Minor. In New Testament times this calling is done by the Lord through groups of Christians rather than immediately.

Again no mode of procedure is indicated by Scripture as to how this must be done. There is reason to believe that the method varied. Sometimes the apostle Paul would dispatch a man like Titus to Crete with specific instructions to ordain elders in every city, at other times congregations selected men to carry out missionary tasks. These men may have been chosen by various methods. When Judas was to be replaced by another apostle, the congregation assembled in Jerusalem selected men who had the proper qualifications for an apostle, men who “have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken from us” (Acts 1:21-22). Two such men were found, Barsabas and Matthias. The choice between them was made by casting lots (Act 1:26).

In a similar manner the church today proceeds to call men into the Christian ministry. It trains them at a theological seminary until the faculty declares them fit for the ministry, and then a congregation, or the church at large, extends a call to these men through the assignment committee. In this manner the office seeks the man, not vice versa.

To attest publicly the competence of the candidate and the legitimacy of his call, the church employs the rite of ordination. This is nothing more or less than the confirmation of the fact that the candidate who has been declared eligible for the ministry by those who have trained him has been properly called by a congregation to serve it as its pastor. From the earliest times this rite was observed with the laying on of hands, symbolizing the prayers of the congregation imploring the blessing of God on the ministry of the pastor being ordained and installed. Ordination neither confers the pastoral office, nor is it a sacrament, as the Roman church teaches, conveying an indelible priestly character.

Through the properly called and ordained ministers of the Word the church of God is fed with the Bread of Life, the means of grace, the gospel of Christ, which is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe.