

The Doctrine of Church and Ministry in the Life of the Church Today

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“Lift High the Cross.” That is the theme of this fifty-first biennial convention of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. “Lift High the Cross.” That is what we sing in the hymn that has become popular in our midst since it was included in the *Sampler* of new hymns and liturgy published by the Joint Hymnal Committee in 1986. “Lift High the Cross” is the name also of the special offering that is being gathered for mission expansion and the ongoing work of our synod. To “Lift High the Cross” might well define our purpose as individual Christians and as a church. It is the reason for our existence. It explains why God has placed us into this world and lets us go on living instead of taking us to himself in heaven as soon as he has brought us to faith in Christ.

Two years ago our synod formally adopted the following statement of its mission:

As men, women and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and for eternity, using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God.

Briefly stated, this mission statement declares that it is our purpose as a church to lift high the cross of Christ as a rallying point for the nations of the earth. Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord exhorts us, “Raise a banner for the nations” (Is 62:10). Emblazoned on that banner is the cross of Christ. On the cross Jesus paid the full, bitter price of our redemption. Through his triumphant resurrection on Easter morning, the cross, an instrument of torture, shame and death, has been transformed into a symbol of victory, hope and life. Proudly we raise it high above our churches, place it on our altars, hang it in our homes and, crafted of precious metals, wear it as jewelry.

Looking forward to the coming of the promised Savior, Isaiah declared, “The glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it” (Is 40:5). He urged God’s Old Testament people and he urges us, “Lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid” (Is 40:9). He encourages us as messengers of the gospel to point to Christ, the mighty Conqueror of sin, death and hell, and to proclaim to despairing, dying sinners, “Here is your God!” (Is 40:9).

Moved by the Holy Spirit, who works through the regenerating power of the gospel, a huge multitude that no one can count have become Jesus’ disciples and rallied around the cross. To the 120 believers who met together in Jerusalem on Pentecost, about 3000 were added before the day was over. A short time later the number grew to about 5000 men, not counting women and children. Since then the ranks of Christ’s disciples have increased to include people from every nation, tribe and language. Many have already entered into eternal glory. Some hundreds of millions are to be found in the 20,780 distinct Christian denominations that exist in the world today. To them are to be added the many, beginning with Adam and Eve, who in Old Testament

times waited in confident faith for the promised Seed of the woman to come and crush the serpent's head and deliver them from Satan's power.

All of these believers taken together form what the Bible calls the church. In the Apostles' Creed we speak of it as "the holy Christian church, the communion of saints," that is, the fellowship of all those whom the Holy Spirit has sanctified. He has kindled the lamp of faith in their hearts and set them apart from the rest of the human race. He has made them holy in God's sight by clothing them in the spotless robe of Christ's perfect righteousness. Whether young or old, male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, white or black or brown or red or yellow, they are all one, one in Christ, one in faith in their crucified and risen Savior (Ga 3:26-28).

The Bible has much to say about the church and its work, its ministry. The time allotted at this convention for this presentation, generous as it is, does not permit us to enter fully into all aspects of this precious doctrine. Large books have been written on this subject. Our Northwestern Publishing House recently was asked to consider for possible publication a manuscript of more than 500 pages on this subject. We shall, therefore, have to limit ourselves to sketching the Bible's teaching in broad strokes and selecting only certain points for elaboration.

Like almost all doctrines of Scripture, the doctrine of church and, ministry has been the subject of almost endless controversy. Time will not permit us to enter into all the errors regarding this doctrine that through the years have reared their heads. It will be our purpose to "diligently study the Scriptures" (in 5:39) so as to glean from them the sacred truths that God presents to us in this sacred Book. As with all that God has to say to us in his inspired, inerrant and authoritative Word, the doctrine of church and ministry has been revealed "to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Ro 15:4). To that end may God bless our study!

The topic assigned for our consideration is:

The Doctrine of Church and Ministry in the Life of the Church Today

This leads us to speak about:

- I. The church's Master Builder;
- II. The church's structure; and
- III. The church's ministry.

I. The Church's Master Builder

Every building has a builder. This is obvious. The writer to the Hebrews expresses it as an axiom, "Every house is built by someone" (3:4). It is self-evident then also that the church, which Scripture calls a "spiritual house" (1 Pe 2:5), has a builder. Who is this builder?

Peter's Confession

The first passage in the New Testament in which the word *church* occurs is Matthew 16:18. When Jesus was with his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, where the Jordan River has its source near Mount Hermon, he asked them, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Among the people there was a great deal of speculation about this strange man from Galilee who was obviously a prophet. Some thought that John the Baptist, whom King Herod had

beheaded, may have returned to life. Others suggested that Jesus might be the prophet Elijah, who had been taken bodily into heaven. Because of their misunderstanding of a prophecy of Malachi (4:5), they expected Elijah to return to earth before the coming of the Messiah. Still others imagined that Jesus might be Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets. Then Jesus asked his disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” The question was addressed to all of them, and Simon Peter, who often acted as their spokesman, answered for them all, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus approved of Peter’s answer and said, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” Then Jesus went on to say, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Jesus says the church is his, and he is its builder. We need to look a bit more closely at this account in order to see just who this builder, Jesus, is.

Son of Man—Son of God

We notice first of all that Jesus calls himself the Son of Man. Jesus liked to refer to himself by this name, using it 81 times in the New Testament. It occurs in the Old Testament as a title of the promised Messiah. The prophet Daniel had a vision in which he saw “one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven...He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (7:13,14).

By appropriating this title Jesus was laying claim to being the promised Messiah. “Son of Man” describes him, of course, as a true man, a member of the human race a descendant of Adam (Lk 3:37). But more than that, by using this title Jesus was also claiming to be true God, since according to the Old Testament the Messiah would be not only a true man but also the Son of God (2 Sm 7:14; Ps 2:7; 45:6). By designating himself as the Son of Man Jesus was therefore asserting that he was the promised Savior of the world, the Seed of the woman who came to crush the serpent’s head and free fallen mankind from the power of the devil (Gn 3:15). He had to be both God and man so that as the sinless Second Adam he could substitute for us sinners, take upon himself God’s curse on us and fulfill God’s law perfectly in our stead. In Christ, God shared in our humanity. To carry out his plan of salvation God, in the person of Jesus Christ, took on human flesh and blood “so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (He 2:14).

Now consider Peter’s answer to the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter confessed, “You are the Christ,” that is, the Messiah, the One anointed by God to carry out his plan of salvation. By adding, “the Son of the living God,” Peter was saying that he believed that Jesus was God himself.

This was a most remarkable confession on Peter’s part. As a result of it Peter—and the other disciples for whom he was speaking—was blessed. He had the priceless blessing of salvation. He was a child of God and an heir of heaven.

But Peter did not arrive at this insight by his own thinking or reasoning ability. Jesus points out that this was revealed to him by God, Jesus’ Father in heaven. God opened Peter’s heart to see that Jesus of Nazareth was more than a carpenter’s son. God inspired Peter to confess that Jesus was in fact the Son of the living God, God incarnate.

“On This Rock I Will Build My Church”

“You are Peter,” Jesus continued. Jesus himself had given this disciple this name. When Andrew brought his brother Simon to Jesus, “Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter)” (Jn 1:42). The Aramaic name Cephas and its Greek equivalent, Peter, mean “a rock, a stone, a boulder.” Jesus makes a play on words when he says, “You are *Peter*, and on this *rock* I will build my church.” Peter was a rock-man by virtue of his faith in Christ, the Rock.

As is well known, the church of Rome claims that Jesus says he will build his church on Peter. It is significant, however, that Jesus uses two different words for rock. While *Peter* means a loose rock or stone, the second word *rock* means bedrock, the solid kind of rock in the earth which serves as an immovable foundation for a building.

It is clear also from other parts of Scripture that Jesus did not say that he would build his church on the man Peter. What a poor foundation that would have been! Hardly had Peter made this beautiful confession of faith when Jesus had to rebuke him sharply, “Get behind me, Satan!” (Mt 16:23). Peter had objected when Jesus told his disciples that he was going to suffer and die at the hands of the Jewish authorities and would rise again on the third day. Think also of Peter’s shameful denial of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest’s palace. Recall, too, how Paul had to reprimand Peter publicly when Peter compromised the gospel by his conduct at Antioch (Ga 2:11ff). No, Jesus did not say that he would build his church on Peter.

What then is the rock on which Jesus said he would build his church? The answer has been given: The rock is the truth which Peter confessed, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This truth is a one-sentence summary of the gospel, and the gospel is the means Jesus uses to build his church. It has also been said, as was indicated above: The rock is Jesus Christ himself. Luther understands Jesus to say, “On this rock, that is, on me, Christ, I will build all of my Christendom.”ⁱ

Essentially there is little difference between these two explanations because Jesus is the gospel personified. He asserts that he is “the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). His name, Jesus, which was given him before his birth, means Savior. After Pentecost Peter declares that “there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Ac 4:12). Paul says explicitly, “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Referring to the spiritual rock that accompanied the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, Paul also states, “That rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). Jesus is a Rock because he is a solid, trustworthy foundation for our faith. Jacob used the same metaphor when he called the Lord “the Rock of Israel” (Gn 49:24). Jesus is a rock infinitely firmer and more permanent than Gibraltar.

We know how important the foundation of a building is. If a building does not have a good, solid foundation, its walls will crack, and eventually the building may collapse (Mt 7:24-27). When the Brooklyn Bridge was built more than a hundred years ago, the piers were set on bedrock to enable them to support the suspension cables and give the bridge stability.

Peter must have had in mind what Jesus said to him about the building of his church when he wrote to the Christians scattered throughout Asia Minor, “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house” (1 Pe 2:4,5). Jesus, the Master Builder, had placed these believers, one by one, as living stones, into that beautiful building which is his church.

Astute readers of the Bible will note that in other passages Scripture speaks of another foundation of the church. To the Christians at Ephesus Paul writes, “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household,

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (2:19). Thoughtful students of the Scriptures will not see in these words a contradiction, however, to what we have heard about Christ as the foundation on which the church is built. “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tm 3:16), and the Holy Spirit did not lead Paul to contradict in his letter to the Ephesians what he had written to the Corinthians.

The apostles and prophets wrote “as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21). Their writings, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, are therefore a unique, word-for-word revelation from God to bring sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the heart and core of the Scriptures. The Old Testament writings testify about him, as he expressly declares (Jn 5:39). All of the New Testament Scriptures were written for the same purpose that John tells us he had in mind in writing his Gospel, namely, “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31.). For this reason the writings of the apostles and prophets can be called the foundation of the church.

“My Church”

From Jesus’ words to Peter it is also clear what the church is of which he is the builder. The Greek word for *church* which Jesus uses literally means an assembly, a group of people who have been called together. Luther translated it with the German word *Gemeinde*, meaning the gathering or assembly of Christ’s people. These people all have the same attitude toward Christ, the same God-given faith, that Peter confessed when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” As has been mentioned, in the Apostles’ Creed we call the church “the communion of saints,” that is, the fellowship of all who believe in Jesus as their Savior.

Jesus testifies to the permanence and security of the church, built as it is on a solid, unshakable foundation, when he says, “The gates of Hades will not overcome it.” *Hades* is a transliteration of the Greek word Jesus uses here. Although it may sometimes refer to death or the grave (e.g., Re 20:13,14), in this instance it is a name for hell, the place of torment to which the unbelieving rich man went when he died (Lk 16:23). Hell is pictured as a fortress, the stronghold of the devil and his legions. The church is so safe and secure on its rock foundation that the forces of hell, storm against it as they will, cannot overthrow it.

What comfort there is for us in this assurance of our Lord! We are living in a time when it seems that Satan has been turned loose (Re 20:3,7-9) and has unleashed against Christ’s church every weapon that he has in his arsenal. He uses the powerful tools of the mass media—TV, videos, radio, the press—to invade our homes, assault God’s Word and ridicule our faith. He uses agencies of education and government to spread humanistic, antichristian philosophies and to promote a godless, hedonistic lifestyle. Abortionists, feminists and homosexuals call evil good and good evil. Atheistic evolutionists stubbornly deny what their senses and reason tell them and refuse to believe what God has clearly revealed about himself in his creation (Ps 19:1; Ro 1:18-20).

In his efforts to destroy the church Satan works not only from outside the visible church of confessing Christians, however, but also from within. The Roman papacy, the archantichrist, and prominent leaders of Christian church bodies and organizations like the World Council of Churches brazenly contradict and openly oppose what God says in his holy Word. The world of today, like that of Jesus’ day, scoffs at the truth God revealed to Peter and his fellow disciples, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. We need to take to heart Jesus’ warning that in the last days, because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most believers

will grow cold. But he has also promised that he who stands firm to the end will be saved (Mt 24:12,13).

Christ's church is as invincible as he is. He is God, the supreme, sovereign Ruler of heaven and earth (Eph 1:23). Scripture tells us that the Lord in heaven laughs as his enemies rage and plot in vain against him and his Christ (Ps 2:4). Christ and his church are invulnerable to their attacks. The church is impregnable. With Luther we sing in his battle hymn of the Reformation:

Tho' devils all the world should fill,
All eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill,
They shall not overpow'r us. (TLH, 262:3)

Word Pictures

The Bible uses many other beautiful word pictures to describe Christ's church. It is God's household, his family, his people (Eph 2:19; 1 Tm 3:15; 1 Pe 4:17; Ps 110:1; 2 Cor 6:16; 1 Pe 2:9,10). It is called Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (He 12:22; Ps 46:4; 48:1,2), God's field, God's building (1 Cor 3:9), a holy temple in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph 2:21,22; 1 Cor 3:16). An especially appealing picture is that of Christ as the Bridegroom and the church as his bride (Jn 3:29; Re 21:9; 2 Cor 11:2,3; Ps 45; Song of Sol).

The Body of Christ

The Bible expresses the tender relationship between Christ and his church by describing the church as Christ's body. He is the head, and we are his members (Eph 1:22,23; 4:12,16; 5:23; Col 1:18,24; Ro 12:4,5; 1 Cor 12:12,13,27). It should be noted that this language is not purely figurative. The church, the fellowship of believers, actually is Christ's spiritual body. For that reason whatever is done to Christ's members is done to him (Mt 25:40). When Paul persecuted Christians, he was persecuting Christ (Ac 9:4).

One often hears people lamenting that the divisions in the outward, visible church are fracturing Christ's body. His body is not a visible organization, however, but the spiritual fellowship of all true believers. In this body there is a perfect, spiritual unity invisible to human eyes (Eph 4:4,5). It is like the unity that exists between Jesus and his heavenly Father. His prayer for this unity among his disciples has been fulfilled in the communion of saints (Jn 17:11,21).

Shepherd and Sheep

The Bible also compares the close bond between Christ and his believers with the love a shepherd has for his sheep. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus says. "I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (Jn 10:14). His sheep listen to his voice and follow him. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus provides for them and protects them so that no one can snatch them out of his hand. Jesus loved his sheep so much that he laid down his life for them and gives them eternal life. He is continually adding to his flock, for he says, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

This tender picture of the Shepherd and his sheep, which occurs repeatedly in the New Testament (Mt 18:12-14; 26:31; Lk 15:3-7; Jn 10:11-16,27-30; He 13:20; 1 Pe 2:25; 5:4; Re 7:17) was familiar also to Old Testament believers (Gn 48:15; 49:24; Ps 23:1; 78:52; 80:1; 95:7;

100:3; Is 40:11; Eze 34:11-23; 37:24; Mic 7:14; Zch 13:7). For 20th century Christians the Twenty-third Psalm remains one of the most treasured passages in the Bible.

Drawing on this precious biblical picture, Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles, “Thank God, [today] a child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When Jesus speaks about bringing other sheep into his flock, he is in reality simply using a different picture to describe his work of building his church. He is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pe 5:2,4). The undershepherds who serve under him, gathering his flock, are also described as builders of the church who serve under the Master Builder. These undershepherds and builders preach the good news through which sinners are brought to repentance and faith. In that way they are added to Christ’s flock or placed as living stones into the spiritual building which is his church.

Paul urges the elders of the congregation in Ephesus to “be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (Ac 20:28), and he speaks of himself and his successors as builders when he writes to the Corinthians, “By the grace God has given to me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds” (1 Cor 3:10). You and I today as messengers of the gospel are building Christ’s church as we work under the direction of the Master Builder, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Capstone—Cornerstone

Jesus’ role in building his church is presented in the Bible in still other terms when he is called the capstone or cornerstone. In Psalm 118:22,23, a passage quoted several times in the New Testament (Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Lk 20:17; Ac 4:11; 1 Pe 2:7), the inspired Psalmist foretells Christ’s victory and his preeminent position in the church when he writes, “The stone the builders (namely, the religious leaders of the Jews) rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.” The Hebrew word translated *capstone* means literally *the head of the corner*.

Through the prophet Isaiah the Lord spoke in similar picture language, “See, I lay in Zion a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed” (28:16; see 1 Pe 2:6). A capstone is a keystone, the crowning stone of an arch. In ancient times a cornerstone was the most important stone in a building. The lines of the building were determined by the cornerstone. All the other stones fitted into the building were aligned with it.

In the church all believers as living stones are in perfect alignment with Christ. His will is theirs. His Word is a lamp for their feet and a light for their path (Ps 119:105). On the other hand, anyone whose heart and life do not square with Jesus Christ is not placed into the holy temple of his church.

In many of our hymns we confess the truth that Jesus is the Master Builder of his church. One of the most popular is the one by Samuel J. Stone:

The church’s one foundation
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the Word.
From heav’n He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;

With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died. (TLH, 473:1)

God grant us his grace that we may always firmly cling to this vital truth and courageously confess it in the hostile world we live in today!

II. The Church's Structure

A Church of Living Stones

In Matthew 16:18, as we have seen, Jesus used the language of the building trade when he promised: “on this rock I will build my church.” We have heard, too, how Peter, following his Master’s example, speaks of Jesus as a “living Stone” and of Christians as “living stones” who are being “built into a spiritual house” (1 Pe 2:4,5). God made Peter a living stone by creating faith in his heart and enabling him to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

It was God also who worked faith in the hearts of the Christians to whom Peter addressed his Epistle. It is God, likewise, who in his grace has fulfilled in your life and mine the promise he gave through the prophet Ezekiel: “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean...I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you... You will be my people, and I will be your God” (33:25-28).

All people throughout the world in whom God has performed this miracle of bringing them to faith in Jesus Christ are such living stones that have been placed into the spiritual building Christ calls his church. Built, like Peter, on Christ, the Rock, they are “no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord,...a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22).

This then is the church, the whole body of believers in Jesus Christ, all who have a God-given faith like Peter’s. We call it the communion or fellowship of saints. Luther calls it the “holy Christendom.”ⁱⁱⁱ

“Tell It to the Church”

The second time Jesus uses the word *church* is in Matthew 18. In this chapter Jesus is urging his disciples to do all they can to win back a fellow Christian who has fallen into sin. Just as a faithful shepherd goes after a single sheep that has wandered away from the flock, so Jesus, the Good Shepherd, wants us to make every effort to rescue a Christian brother or sister who has strayed from the fold (Mt 18:10-18). First of all, we will try personally to bring the sinner to repentance. If that fails, we will enlist the help of one or two others. If that effort too is unsuccessful, Jesus says, “Tell it to the church” (v 17).

The word *church* has the very same sense here that it had in chapter 16 where Jesus spoke of building his church. Jesus says, “Tell it to those who believe in me.” They are the last ones who will be concerned and whose help can be solicited to try to restore the one who has fallen away. When Jesus gave his disciples these instructions, there were, of course, no organized congregations of Christians. The disciples at that time had no conception of church organization and structure as we know it today. “Tell it to the church” means therefore: Tell it to

your fellow Christians, whatever the group may be that comes into consideration and in whatever practical way it can be reached.

Under ordinary circumstances, the group of believers with whom the impenitent sinner is associated is, naturally, the local congregation. There may also be other gatherings of believers apart from the local congregation, however. For example, the student body here at Dr. Martin Luther College comes together every day for chapel services. Suppose that one student despises God's Word and is regularly absent from the devotions. His roommate speaks to him about it. If he fails to convince the delinquent of his sin, he chooses a friend or two to help him try to bring the sinner to repentance. Perhaps they too fail. Then the administration and the entire student body are drawn in, but to no avail. Finally, the student is expelled from school. Since he is a member of a congregation in his home town, concern for the brotherhood and good order require that these Christians also be enlisted in dealing with the impenitent sinner. If he refuses to hear them, they will regard him as "a pagan and a tax collector" (Mt 18:17), that is, an unbeliever on the road to hell. We call this excommunication. In practical terms, the school's action is similar. But it is not the end of the road in this case because the student is also associated with the Christians in his home congregation, and they too will be concerned about his spiritual welfare.

If the straying sheep repents, his fellow Christians will rejoice and forgive him, and that forgiveness is as valid and certain in heaven also as if Christ had forgiven the sinner himself. On the other hand, if the person persists in his impenitence and the church excludes him as an unbeliever, that judgment too is as valid and certain as if Christ had pronounced it himself.^{iv} Jesus told his disciples, "Whatever you bind [that is, do not forgive] on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose [that is, forgive] on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18).

Believers Are Saints

In almost every instance when the Bible uses the word *church*, it is talking about a group of believing Christians. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), the church in Thessalonica (1 Th 1:1; 2:1), the churches in Galatia (Ga 1:2), he was writing to fellow Christians, to the believers in Jesus Christ in those places. The meaning is exactly the same when he addresses other letters to the saints in Rome, in Ephesus, in Philippi and to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse. In his First Epistle Peter addresses fellow believers as "God's elect, . . . who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1 Pe 1:1,2), and in his Second Letter he writes to "those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours" (2 Pe 1:1).

These believers are called saints, holy people, not because they are without sin, but because the whole loathsome load of their sins has been forgiven for Christ's sake. Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Through faith in him the saints "have washed their robes and made them white" in his blood (Re 7:14). By God's pure grace we are such saints. For Jesus' sake God has put all our sins behind his back (Is 38:17). He has hurled them into the depths of the sea (Mic 7:19). The church is holy because, as Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (5:25-27).

Sinners are sinless in God's eyes because an incredible exchange has occurred. Taking our place, Christ became a curse for us (Ga 3:13). Paul writes to the Corinthians, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2

Cor 5:21). What an amazing transfer: the sinless one becomes sin, and sinners become God's righteousness. Luther describes the exchange this way: "One man sins, another pays the penalty; one deserves peace, the other has it."^v O yes, as long as we live, we continue to sin, and yet we are saints. As Luther says, "A Christian man is righteous and a sinner at the same time."^{vi} We sin because of our sinful nature. We fall into sin, not willingly but because of our weakness. The good news is that for Jesus' sake God does not count our sins against us.

Faith—a gift of the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies us—is the open hand by which Christ's perfect righteousness becomes our own. His righteousness covers our unrighteousness. What grace, what mercy, what love! With Paul we must exclaim, "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out!...For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!" (Ro 11:33,36).

What a blessing and privilege it is for us to be members of Christ's church, to be living stones in this holy temple in which God lives! It is certainly not a blessing we have earned or deserve. Who of us, if we examine our hearts and lives honestly in the light of the strict demands of God's holy law, must not admit with Paul that we are the worst of sinners (1 Tm 1:15)? That we have received the gift of faith is pure grace and love on the part of our Savior. He tells us as he told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). These words in themselves, incidentally, are enough to give the lie to those who teach a decision theology and call on unbelieving sinners to make a decision for Christ.

Luther's heart fairly leaps for joy as he contemplates God grace in making him a member of Christ's church:

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God.^{vii}

The Invisible Church

Faith is a matter of the heart. Our heart is our innermost being, our soul. "It is with your heart that you believe," Paul writes to the Christians at Rome (10:10). It is, of course, impossible for us to look into another person's heart. Microscopes and CAT-scanners can help to detect cancer, but no microscope and no CAT-scanner can detect the presence or absence of faith. The Bible tells us that "man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sm 16:7). We cannot determine whether a particular person actually believes in Jesus Christ. Only God can do that. And God makes no mistakes. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tm 2:9).

For this reason we say that the church, the communion of saints, is invisible. We cannot identify the individual members. We can judge people only by what they say and do, by what they profess and by the kind of life they live. In the passage from Romans referred to a moment ago Paul speaks not only about saving faith in the heart but also about a sincere confession with the mouth, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (10:9,10).

Not an Imaginary Church

The fact that the church, the communion of saints, is invisible does not mean, however, that it is merely something theoretical. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession stresses that it is not a Platonic idea, an imaginary church, which is to be found nowhere, but that “this Church exists, namely, the truly believing and righteous men scattered throughout the whole world.” It asserts that “some of God’s children are here and there in all the world, in various kingdoms, islands, lands, and cities, from the rising of the sun to its setting.”^{viii}

That Christ’s church is not imaginary but a blessed reality is clear from the fact that God loved and chose its members to be his people from eternity (Ro 8:28-30; Eph 1:4). He has given them to Jesus. Jesus is their Shepherd, and they are his sheep (Jn 10:29; 17:2,6,9). Seated at God’s right hand, Jesus directs and controls all that happens in the world for their benefit (Eph 1:22,23). What comfort there is for us and all our fellow believers in the blessed truth that we are members of Christ’s body, joined together with one another in a perfect unity as the whole body grows not only in numbers but also in spiritual maturity (Eph 4:1-16).

The Marks of the Church

In spite of the fact that the church as such is invisible, its presence in a certain place can be recognized. Just as we know from the wonderful smell as we enter grandma’s house at Thanksgiving that she has a turkey roasting in the oven even though we do not see it, so we know from the use of the gospel in the Word and the sacraments that Christ’s church is present in a particular place. This is true because wherever there are Christians, they hear, read and proclaim God’s Word and administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. That is why we call the gospel in Word and sacrament the marks of the church.

The Augsburg Confession says, “The church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered,”^{ix} and the Apology likewise identifies the marks of the church as “the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments.”^x In many churches errors are mixed with the truth of God’s Word. Errors, however, do not serve to indicate the presence of Christ’s church. Only the pure doctrine of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments can do that. Religious groups that do not have the gospel—the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews and Muslims, for example—are heathen and entirely outside the pale of Christianity.

The Visible Church

We can judge people only by their confession and life. A confession may, however, be false and hypocritical. Ananias and Sapphira, the hypocrites in the congregation at Jerusalem, are evidence of that (Ac 5:1-11). If it becomes apparent that someone who claims to be a member of the church is not a Christian, the church must, of course, deal with him or her as we have seen (Mt 18:15-18). As long as a hypocrite continues to hide his unbelief, however, the church cannot act in the case. Such a person’s judgment rests in the hands of God, who searches the hearts (Ro 8:27). The possibility of the presence of hypocrites means that no individual church or group of people who profess to be Christians can as such be identified with the communion of saints.

The name *church* is also given in Scripture, however, to a group of people in a certain place who profess to have faith in Christ. When used in this way, the word includes both believers and hypocrites. In 3 John 9,10 we are told about a man by the name of Diotrephes, a church leader, who exercised dictatorial powers and put some faithful Christians “out of the

church.” He could not, of course, put them out of the communion of saints. He expelled them from the congregation, the visible group of those who professed faith in Christ. Such a group is called a church in a broader sense of the term. It is given this name because of the believers who are present in it.

This use of the word is a figure of speech called synecdoche or part for the whole. For example, when you go to the garden center to buy a bag of lawn seed, only if you read the fine print on the package will you know that you have received not just grass seed but also a small percentage of weed seeds and inert material. Nevertheless, by synecdoche the package is labeled lawn seed. The other contents are disregarded. In the broader use of the word *church* the whole group gets its name from the most important part, the believers. The hypocrites who may be present are disregarded.

Orthodox and Heterodox Churches

We speak of churches which teach God’s Word in its truth and purity as orthodox churches. Those that teach false doctrines in addition to pure doctrine are known as heterodox churches. We can recognize whether a church is orthodox or heterodox by comparing its doctrine and practice with Holy Scripture. Jesus expects his followers to do this. Through the apostle John he says, “Do not believe every spirit [that is, religious teacher], but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 in 4:1).

Jesus wants us to hold strictly to what he teaches us in his holy Word. He says, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:31,32). Jesus sends us out to make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything he has commanded us (Mt 28:20). We are neither to add anything to what he has commanded nor to subtract anything from it (Re 22:19,20).

Led by the Holy Spirit, we will extend the right hand of fellowship to all orthodox churches (Ga 2:9; Ro 15:5,6; 1 Cor 1:10), but withhold or withdraw it from those who teach false doctrine. God’s directives are clear. He tells us, “Watch out for false prophets” (Mt 7:15), “Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Ro 16:17), and again, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 10,11). On the basis of the marks of the church and because of God’s promise (Is 55:10,11), we have the confidence that there are true believers in Christ also in heterodox churches, even though we cannot recognize them or have fellowship with them.

The Means of Grace

We also speak of the gospel in the Word and the sacraments as the means of grace. These are the means or channels by which God’s grace comes to us. Just as the Alaska pipeline carries oil from the Prudhoe Bay oil field to the port of Valdez, so the means of grace are the pipeline by which God conveys to us the forgiveness of sins which Jesus obtained for us.

The church comes into being by these means, and it lives and grows by these means. All of the church’s members “have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pe 1:23). Their faith is sustained and strengthened by these means, for “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:17). Jesus says, “The words I have spoken to you are

spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63), that is, through his words the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts and through his words we receive eternal life.

Article V of the Augsburg Confession therefore says:

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.^{xi}

God’s Spirit comes to us therefore through the means of grace and in no other way. Scripture says, “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor 1:21). In his high priestly prayer Jesus asked his heavenly Father to sanctify his disciples by the truth of his Word, and this was his prayer not only for those who were with him in the upper room that Maundy Thursday evening, but also for those who would believe in him through their message (in 17:17,20). Concerning baptism Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5). According to Titus 3:5, baptism is “the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.” When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, the ties are strengthened that bind us together as members of Christ’s body, the church (1 Cor 10:17). Contrary to the claims of enthusiasts of all times, including present-day Pentecostals and the charismatics who are found in almost all denominations, Luther emphasizes in the Smalcald Articles, “God grants His Spirit or grace to no one except through or with the preceding outward Word.”^{xii}

Not all, of course, who hear the gospel believe it. Jesus wept over the city of Jerusalem because its people were not willing to accept him as their Savior (Mt 23:37). Stephen, the first Christian martyr, rebuked the stiff-necked Jews because they were resisting the Holy Spirit (Ac 7:51). The gospel was preached to the Israelites who were delivered from bondage in Egypt, “but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (He 4:2). When the gospel is rejected, it is not because of any weakness in it but because of the wickedness of the unbelieving hearers.

God gives us the assurance concerning his Word, however, “It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). The gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Ro 1:16).

When Paul and his co-workers preached the gospel, therefore, there was a double result. He says, “We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2 Cor 2:15,16).

The preaching of the gospel has the same double result today. Some are touched by it and receive it gladly; others close their hearts to it and reject it in unbelief. In Article V of the Augsburg Confession we therefore say that the Holy Ghost “works faith where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.”^{xiii}

Through the Word the Holy Spirit works quietly, almost imperceptibly. Jesus told Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (Jn 3:8). God impressed on Elijah that he does not come in a powerful wind, an earthquake or fire, but in a gentle whisper. When Elijah thought that he was the only surviving member of God’s church in Israel, God revealed to him that there were still seven thousand who had not bowed the knee to

Baal (1 Kgs 19:9-18). Through the prophet Zechariah God said, I carry out my work “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit” (4:6).

This work goes on when an individual Christian shares the good news of Christ with others. When the believers in Jerusalem, as a result of persecution, fled from the city, they “preached the word wherever they went” (Ac 8:4). This work goes on also when individual Christians join together for the purpose of encouraging and edifying one another by means of the Word and the sacraments and to combine their efforts in sharing the blessings of the gospel with others.

The Holy Spirit Draws Christians Together

In Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed we have learned to say that the Holy Ghost “calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth.” It was the Holy Spirit who led those converted on Pentecost to meet together and to devote themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Ac 2:42,46). Such fellowship is pleasing to God. He wants us to practice it. The writer to the Hebrews urges us, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:25). We are exhorted to “make every effort to keep the unity in the Spirit” (Eph 4:3).

The Holy Spirit gathered Christians together so that there was a church in Jerusalem (Ac 8:1), in Antioch (Ac 11:26), in Cenchrea (Ro 16:1), at Corinth (1 Cor 1:1), in Laodicea (Col 4:16), in Thessalonica (1 Th 1:1). We read about the seven churches of Asia Minor (Re 1:20) and others. We are told about groups of believers, also called churches, that met in the homes of people like Priscilla and Aquila (Ro 16:5), Nympha (Col 4:15) and Philemon (Phm 2). All these groups, whether large or small, have the promise of Jesus, “Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20). Nowhere, however, does Scripture tell us how such groups of Christians are to be structured.

Not only does the Holy Spirit gather Christians together in a certain locality, however. He also draws them together with believers living elsewhere. As soon as the apostles in Jerusalem heard that people in Samaria had accepted the Word of God, they sent Peter and John to establish contact with them (Ac 8:14). When the church in Jerusalem heard that a great number of people in Antioch had turned to the Lord, they sent Barnabas to Antioch (Ac 11:22). The Book of Acts shows us that the congregation in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to consult with the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about the question of circumcision (Ac 15:2). Those who met together in this first church council responded by addressing a letter “to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia” (Ac 15:23).

Various congregations in an area are grouped together in what might be called regional churches, as, for example, “the Galatian churches” (1 Cor 16:1) and those of Macedonia and Achaia (2 Cor 9:2). Luke writes about “the church [notice the singular!] throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria” (Ac 9:31). When Paul decided to take Timothy, whose home was in Lystra, with him on his missionary journeys, Timothy received a good recommendation from the brothers at Lystra and Iconium (Ac 16:2) and the elders laid their hands on him (1 Tm 4:14). The congregations of Macedonia, which included Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and perhaps other cities, acted jointly in choosing a representative to accompany Paul as he traveled to Jerusalem with the offerings that had been gathered for fellow Christians who were suffering hardship in Judea (2 Cor 8:18,19). Paul wrote a letter to the church at Colosse and asked them to see that it was also read in the church of the Laodiceans, while they in turn read the letter from Laodicea.

All these joint activities—theological discussions, correspondence, ordaining a worker, gathering relief funds, choosing representatives, exchanging letters—were what we might call the beginning of synodical activities. In them we see the church at work in larger groupings. Such larger groupings developed very naturally—under the influence of the Holy Spirit, of course. In their activities we see the church at work just as in the local congregations.

Structure and Polity

What kind of structure, organization and government the congregations and larger groupings we read about in the New Testament may have had, whether temporary or permanent, we do not know. Apart from the injunction to meet together for mutual encouragement and joint worship (He 10:24,25), there was no command of God to organize either local congregations or larger affiliations.

Under the freedom that the gospel gives, New Testament believers are at liberty to develop whatever organizational structure meets their needs. “All things are yours,” Paul writes (1 Cor 3:21) and warns against any infringement on the liberty we Christians enjoy (Ga 5:1). While the moral law as it is inscribed in the human heart (Ro 2:14,15) and repeated in the New Testament (Mk 12:29-31; Ro 13:9,10) serves the New Testament church as a mirror, curb and guide, there are no God-given rules and regulations governing the structure and worship of the church like those that regulated God’s Old Testament people. Whereas God dealt with the Israelites as minor children, he deals with us New Testament believers as full-grown, mature sons and daughters (Ga 4:1-7). The only stipulations the New Testament makes are that in our church structure and worship we make certain that everything serves a beneficial purpose (1 Cor 10:23) and is done “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor 14:40) in a spirit of Christian love (1 Cor 16:14).

As we have seen, congregations in various localities are the first to develop under the gathering influence of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament describes in detail how this occurred in Jerusalem, in Samaria, in Antioch and elsewhere. And then a larger fellowship developed as Christians established bonds with fellow Christians elsewhere. What impresses us as we scan the New Testament is that there are many descriptive passages, passages that describe these developments, but no prescriptive passages, passages that prescribe how Christians are to organize the church on a local or wider level.

Apart from the usual structure of our local congregations and larger church bodies, Christians today have established a great variety of other structures to carry out various gospel-sharing and charitable activities. We have mission societies, Lutheran high school and college associations, organizations to provide care for the elderly and others who need various types of health services or to conduct institutional, Bible camp, radio, TV and many other kinds of ministries.

Of all the structures which Christians create the first will naturally be the congregation where they regularly come together to hear God’s Word, to sing and pray and to receive the sacraments. Together they will provide for the Christian training of their children, for reaching out with the gospel in their own community and for exercising Christian discipline and charity. Their charity will be extended to any who are in need and “especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Ga 6:10).

Congregations will then naturally join hands with one another to form a larger church body to carry out more efficiently and effectively the work of preparing future workers for the church (2 Tm 2:2), of carrying the gospel into all the world (Mk 16:15) and for doing

cooperatively other kinds of kingdom work that a smaller group would find it difficult to do on its own. Christian cooperation and love will characterize the members of a congregation as they worship and work together. The same attitude of brotherliness will be evident in the work congregations do together in the wider fellowship of a synod.

Nowhere does Scripture say that a local congregation is divinely instituted but that an association of congregations in a larger church body is a human arrangement. The same Holy Spirit who gathers believers into congregations gathers congregations into larger fellowships such as synods. As it would be unchristian for one of Jesus, sheep to say, "I want nothing to do with the rest of the flock," so it would be unchristian for a congregation to say, "We want nothing to do with other congregations that hold the same faith as we do." This does not, of course, mean that all congregations must belong to the same larger church body. For a variety of reasons separate organizations may be formed, but they will work together in a cooperative spirit of Christian fellowship and love.

Through the influence of the Holy Spirit synods may be drawn together into an intersynodical fellowship like that of the former Synodical Conference of North America, which, after its founding in 1872, was for many years a bulwark of confessional Lutheranism. After the break-up of the Synodical Conference because of doctrinal differences, it was the Holy Spirit who led our Wisconsin Synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod to establish the Evangelical Lutheran Confessional Forum for mutual encouragement and consultation. If the proposed international Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference becomes a reality, this, too, will be the work of the Holy Spirit.

As has been mentioned, other structures may be created to carry on kingdom activities that the organizations already in existence may not be engaged in. But they will not intrude on work that is already being done. The Holy Spirit does not lead Christians to form competitive organizations that duplicate or interfere with work that other groups are already doing. That Christians have the right to form such organizations and to call workers to carry on a particular kind of gospel ministry is obvious. Christians do not give up the keys they possess when they become members of a congregation. Such groups will be careful, however, to observe the previously mentioned scriptural principles of good order and Christian love (I Cor 14:33,40; 16:14).

Concerning all of these structures Jesus says, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:20). What does he mean by coming together in his name? Jesus' name is, of course, his revelation of himself as our Savior. Christians come together in Jesus' name, therefore, when they assemble in response to the gospel or in the interest of spreading it. They may at times come together for other purposes, as, for example, to play softball or dartball. But they assemble in Jesus' name when they come together for worship and to be built up in their faith by hearing the gospel and receiving the sacraments. They come together in Jesus' name when they join hands in various types of kingdom work. By their very nature as lights in the world they will do all they can to bring the light of the gospel to the many millions of their fellow human beings who are still living in darkness and in the shadow of death (Mt 5:14,16; 4:16; Jn 1:4,5).

"I will build my church," Jesus declares. The outward form that the church takes is, however, a matter of Christian liberty. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Christ's people will use their sanctified Christian judgment in creating structures that will best enable them to carry out the church's ministry.

III. The Church's Ministry

The Church's One Assignment—The Ministry of the Gospel

Shortly before his ascension into heaven Jesus gave his followers the Great Commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:19,20). At the same time he reminded them that his heavenly Father had given him all authority in heaven and on earth and assured them that, as they went about this work of making disciples, he would be with them always, even to the very end of the age. Mark reports that Jesus sent his disciples out with these words, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:15,16). Luke informs us that Jesus, looking into the future, told those who believed in him, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8).

We see then that Jesus has given his church one assignment, one task—to preach the gospel, the good news of the forgiveness of sins. This includes, of course, the administration of the sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. These, together with the Word, offer and give that forgiveness to sinners (1 Pe 3:21; 1 Cor 11:24,25).

Jesus did not give his disciples the responsibility to maintain law and order in the world—that is the duty of government (Ro 13:1-7). Neither did he instruct them to try to eradicate poverty or to improve living conditions in society (Mt 26:11), although many churches and people outside the church consider this to be the church's responsibility. Jesus gave his church one assignment and only one—to preach the gospel.

The Ministry of the Keys

Jesus had given his disciples this assignment even earlier. In the evening of the day of his resurrection, as his disciples met together behind locked doors, Jesus appeared to them and said, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” With that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (Jn 20:21-23).

This awesome power, the authority to forgive or not forgive sins, Jesus had previously given to his disciples when, using figurative language, he gave them the keys of the kingdom of heaven. As has already been mentioned, when Jesus told Peter that he would build his church on himself as a solid rock, he added, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind [that is, do not forgive] on earth will be bound [not forgiven] in heaven, and whatever you loose [that is, forgive] on earth will be loosed [forgiven] in heaven” (Mt 16:19). As was also explained earlier, Jesus addressed Peter here as the representative of all the apostles. He made this crystal clear a short time later when he spoke the same words to all of them using the plural form of the word *you* (Mt. 18:18). Just as keys lock or unlock the doors to a house, so the doors to heaven are locked for a person when his sins are not forgiven and unlocked when they are forgiven.

As we remember from our confirmation classes, in the Catechism this authority to forgive or to retain sins is called the *ministry* of the keys. That is because Scripture calls the work Jesus gave his disciples to do when he commissioned them to preach the gospel a ministry. The word *ministry* means service. It is the word Jesus used in its verbal form when he said, “The

Son of Man did not come to be served [KJV, be ministered unto], but to serve [KJV, minister]” (Mt 20:28).

In his Second Epistle to the Corinthians the apostle Paul compares the glorious ministry of the Old Covenant with the much more glorious ministry of the New Covenant (3:7-11). The ministry of the Old Covenant was the ministry of the law, a ministry that brought death and that condemns men. The ministry of the New Covenant is the ministry of the gospel. Paul calls it the ministry of the Spirit. It is a ministry that brings righteousness.

Later in this same Epistle Paul writes that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (5:17,18). The good news “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them,” is to be preached to all people. God “has committed to us,” that is, to all who are believers in Christ, “the message of reconciliation” (5:19). Reconciliation is a synonym for justification (Ro 5:9-11) It is God’s announcement to sinners that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. The work of preaching reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins through Christ is what Paul calls “the *ministry* of reconciliation.” The precious treasure of forgiveness which Jesus obtained for sinners is to be distributed to them.

When Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach the gospel and to use the keys of the kingdom of heaven, he instituted or established the ministry of the New Testament. The Augsburg Confession says, “That we may obtain this faith [namely, to believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake (Art. IV)] the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.”^{xiv} In the Formula of Concord the ministry of the church is defined as “the Word preached and heard.”^{xv} In the Smalcald Articles Luther also calls this ministry “the *office* of the Gospel.”^{xvi}

Every Christian a Royal Priest

This ministry or office Jesus has given to the church, that is, to all Christians, to all believers. He did not give it merely to the apostles and their successors as some, at times even in the Lutheran Church, have claimed. And certainly Jesus did not give it not only to Peter. It is a ministry or office that belongs to every Christian and which may be exercised either individually or collectively. Earlier we heard Jesus say, “Tell it to the church,” when previous efforts to regain an erring fellow Christian have failed (Mt 18:17). The church possesses the keys and is to forgive the sinner who repents and exclude one who is impenitent.

For a believer, confessing his faith in Christ is as natural as it is for the sun to shine or for a good tree to bear good fruit. Jesus says, “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34). A heart filled with faith and love for Jesus is like an artesian well. It simply overflows of its own accord. Jesus takes it for granted that Christians will confess their faith when he promises, “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven” (Mt 10:32). That every Christian possesses the New Testament gospel ministry is unmistakably clear when Peter writes to God’s elect scattered throughout Asia Minor, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:9). Every Christian is a royal priest. Every Christian is a minister of the gospel. Paul writes to the Corinthians that God “has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). Luther points out, “These words St. Paul spoke to all Christians, that he might make ministers of the Spirit out of all of them.”^{xvii} That is why the Christians who were persecuted in Jerusalem

and were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria “preached the word wherever they went” (Ac 8:4). They did this spontaneously, of their own accord.

Christians exercise their royal priesthood when they share the gospel with others either personally or through representatives. They declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light in order to lead others out of the darkness of unbelief into the wonderful light of salvation. Jesus urges us, “Let your light shine before men” (Mt 5:16). Paul is addressing all Christians when he writes, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Col 3:16). In our churches the whole congregation participates in singing the hymns and responses in the liturgy, confessing the Creed and offering prayers. Whose heart is not touched when the children preach the gospel in a Christmas Eve service or sing God’s praises in public worship? In doing that they are functioning as royal priests and their testimony has Jesus, approval (Mt 21:16).

Jesus gives his church leaders of various kinds, a point we will come to shortly. At the moment we want to note, however, that these leaders, as Paul tells the Ephesian Christians, are “to prepare God’s people for works of service [literally, for ministry work], so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (4:12,13). All of God’s people are to be equipped to be active in ministry work, encouraging and edifying one another by means of the gospel and sharing it with others. The objective is that we do not remain infants in our Christian faith but “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:15,16).

We see then that the New Testament ministry of the gospel which Jesus instituted has a twofold purpose, namely, to build and enlarge the church outwardly and to build it up and strengthen it inwardly.

Leaders for the Church—The Public Ministry

Reference has been made to leaders of various kinds that Jesus gives his church. In the Epistle to the Hebrews God admonishes us, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you...Imitate their faith” (13:7), and again, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (13:17).

From the very beginning there were, of course, the apostles. Jesus chose and trained them personally to be leaders in his church. Their office was unique not only in that they had a direct call from the Lord but also in that they had the gift of inspiration. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit, the Counselor, would teach them all things and remind them of everything he said to them (Jn 14:26). What they wrote in the New Testament at the direction and under the control of the Holy Spirit would serve as the sure doctrinal foundation of the church (Eph 2:20). The apostles spoke, not in words taught by human wisdom, “but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Cor 2:13). Their every word is God-breathed, divinely inspired (2 Tm 3:16), and therefore absolutely true and without exception trustworthy (Jn 16:13; 17:17; Tt 1:9). Through the apostles’ message others would come to faith in Jesus as their Savior (Jn 17:20). Their office could not therefore be passed on to others. Scripture knows nothing about any apostolic succession, as Rome and the Church of England, for example, claim.

Apart from the special, one-time gift of the apostles, God gives his church leaders of various kinds. Hundreds of years before the coming of Christ God promised through the prophet Jeremiah, “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding” (3:15; see also 23:4). This promise was fulfilled—and continues to be fulfilled—as Paul tells the Ephesians, when Christ not only gave some to be apostles, but also “some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (4:11).

Some New Testament prophets like Agabus had the gift of foretelling future events (Ac 21:10,11). Others were preachers, either explaining special revelations they had received or simply proclaiming God’s Word to instruct and encourage their fellow Christians, as the prophets in the congregation at Corinth did (1 Cor 11:4, 5; 12:10 14:24 ,29-32).

Evangelists like Timothy and the deacon Philip were traveling missionaries (2 Tm 4:5; Ac 8:40; 21:8). Titus was an apostle in the broad sense of the word, a missionary (Tt 1:5; 2 Tm 4:10).

Pastors—the word literally means shepherds—did work like that done by the elders of the congregation at Ephesus whom Paul encouraged to “be shepherds of the church of God.” He urged them, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Ac 20:28). These men, who are described as being both elders (Ac 20:17) and overseers, were to feed God’s people who were under their care with the spiritual food of God’s Word. Their work was like that which Jesus instructed Peter to do when he reinstated him into his apostolic office and told him, “Feed my lambs;...take care of my sheep” (Jn 21:15-17).

It would be a mistake to think that the pastors mentioned in Ephesians 4 are exactly the same as what we call pastors today. In the Corinthian congregation preaching was done by a number of persons, as was the custom in the synagogues. Luther compares that practice with the arrangement for preaching in the church of his day and advises against reinstating it. He writes:

The text shows how it was customary for the prophets to be seated among the people in the churches as the regular parish pastors and preachers, and how the lesson was sung or read by one or two...Then one of the prophets whose turn it was spoke and interpreted the lesson...When one was through, another might have something to add in confirmation or clarification...But I would not be in favor of restoring this custom and doing away with the pulpit.^{xviii}

From this it is clear that the pastorate as we know it today is a historical development and different from the preaching office in the apostolic church.

The teachers did the work of instructing people in God’s Word. Again, it would be a mistake to identify them with the teachers who serve in our Christian elementary schools, high schools and colleges today. Such schools were unknown in the apostolic church.

The New Testament tells us also about other kinds of leaders God gave the church of that time. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, in addition to apostles, prophets and teachers, Paul mentions workers of miracles, those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” In Philippians 1:1 we hear about both overseers and deacons. The latter are also mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:8-10. From Titus 1:5,7 and Acts 20:17,28 we see that the terms elder and overseer are used interchangeably.

In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul writes, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” This shows us

that in the apostolic church there were two kinds of elders who directed affairs, some who did preaching and teaching and others who did not. Peter remarked that he, too, was an elder (1 Pe 5:1).

Some of the people Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 12 had special charismatic gifts, They performed miracles and healings and spoke in tongues. After a time God no longer gave these spectacular gifts to the church. The purpose they served as signs or credentials to accompany those who believed was accomplished (Mk 16:17).

These many kinds of leaders were gifts of God to his church. It is important to note, however, that, although the New Testament mentions many different offices, nowhere are we told that God has specially instituted any particular kind of office, except for the apostolate (Lk 6:13; Ac 1:17,25; Ro 1:5; etc.). Nowhere does God say to the church: You shall establish the office of overseer or elder or pastor or teacher. God simply says, "I will *give* you shepherds" (Jr 3:15). The New Testament simply tells us that Christ "*gave*" some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11), that God "*appointed*" apostles, prophets, teachers and others whom he had equipped with special gifts (1 Cor 12:28), that the Holy Ghost "*made*" the Ephesian elders overseers of the flock (Ac 20:28). Some have claimed that the office of pastor of a local congregation has been divinely instituted in contrast to other offices, but there is no scriptural basis for such a claim. Although there are passages which describe how individuals were chosen for certain offices, no passage prescribes what offices we are to have in the church today.

With respect to the offices of the public ministry it should again be stressed, as we noted in regard to the church's structure, that, although the moral law, God's holy, immutable will, has not been set aside, there are no ceremonial laws or legal regulations in the New Testament. This important truth cannot be emphasized too strongly. It is fundamental to understanding God's way of dealing with his New Testament people. The sweeping statement, "All things are yours" (1 Cor 3:21), gives the church a free hand to establish whatever offices it finds to be necessary or useful (1 Cor 10:23), provided only that the basic considerations of good order and love are taken into account (1 Cor 14:33,40; 16:14).

As we have seen, God gave or appointed leaders to the church. When we now ask *how* God gave them to the church, the answer is that he left it to the Christians themselves to decide what offices were needed and then to choose qualified individuals for those offices. When the congregation in Jerusalem felt the need for persons to assist the apostles by taking care of the distribution of food to the needy, they chose seven men to take over this responsibility (Ac 6:1-6). The congregation at Antioch at the direction of the Holy Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas out on a missionary expedition (Ac 13:1-3). With the approval of the congregations in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to serve these churches (Ac 14:23). Paul instructed Titus to do the same for the congregations in Crete (Tt 1:5). Upon the recommendation of the brothers in Lystra and Iconium, Paul chose and installed Timothy as his assistant (Ac 16:1-3; 1 Tm 4:14).

When such leaders were chosen, it was in fact God who placed them into these offices. Paul told the elders of the Ephesian congregation that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Ac 20:28). From this it is again evident that God deals with his New Testament people as mature sons and daughters. He leaves it to them to use their sanctified Christian judgment in determining what offices are needed.

All of the offices the apostolic church established or that we establish today are forms of what we call the *public ministry*. It is a ministry in which individuals serve in an official,

representative capacity. They do not function in their own name, but in the name and on behalf of their fellow Christians who have entrusted them with this work.

The Call

Among Christians there is no order of rank or hierarchy. All are equal before God (Mt 23:8). All have also been equally entrusted with the ministry of the gospel, as we have seen. It is self-evident then that no one has the right to assume the duties of the public ministry without being called into it. A person who has not been elected to the office cannot act as a representative in Congress from the state of Minnesota. Similarly, the need for a call into the public ministry is indicated by Paul when he asks, “How can they preach unless they are sent?” (Ro 10:15). The Epistle to the Hebrews points out that Old Testament high priests did not assume their office on their own initiative, and even Christ did not assume his high priestly office without being called by God (5:4,5).

The Augsburg Confession is therefore in full agreement with Scripture when it states in Article XIV, “*Of Ecclesiastical Order* they teach that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be regularly called.”^{xix} The right of the church to call is implied in the authority Christ has given it to preach the gospel. Our Confessions therefore assert, “Wherever the Church is, there is the authority [command] to administer the Gospel. Therefore it is necessary for the Church to retain the authority to call, elect, and ordain ministers.”^{xx}

When the church has established an office and entrusted it to someone through a call, it is the Holy Ghost who has led the church to do this (Ac 20:28). Gratefully the church will receive and honor such workers as gifts of Christ to his church. The call, by which those in the public ministry receive their office, spells out the duties and scope of their work. It defines the area of responsibility entrusted to them. It indicates whether that is to serve an entire congregation as its sole pastor or as a member of a pastoral staff, whether that is to be a teacher in a Christian school, whether that is to administer a synodical office, serve as a missionary in a home or world field, be the director of the special Lift High the Cross offering, be a vicar, a Sunday school teacher, a congregational officer, elder, or some other kind of worker in a wide variety of ministries in the church. The call explains whether the work is full-time or part-time, whether it is on a permanent basis or for a limited period of time, whether the preaching and teaching of the gospel is directly involved or whether it is a supportive kind of ministry, whether it is a salaried or volunteer position. Whatever it may be, it is a ministry, a service, that contributes to the building or strengthening of that spiritual temple of which Christ, the Master Builder, spoke when he declared, “on this rock I will build my church.”

The Public ministry—Divinely Instituted

The public ministry is not a mere human arrangement. It is of divine origin. It is God’s will that Christ’s church have shepherds, teachers and leaders of various kinds. We see this from the fact that that he promised and gives them to the church, as we have heard. Their ministry is a form of the New Testament ministry instituted by Christ when he sent his disciples out with the command, “Preach the gospel.” Their assignment is the same. “Preach the Word,” was Paul’s command to Timothy (2 Tm 4:2).

The public ministry did not originate from mere expediency, as some have claimed. It is a special, God-ordained way for the church to carry out the one ministry of the gospel that Jesus has entrusted to it. It is God’s will that the church have well-trained teachers and preachers of the

Word. Paul instructs Timothy to entrust what he had learned from Paul to reliable men who would be qualified to teach others (2 Tm 2:2). As the Apology says, “The Church has the command to appoint ministers.”^{xxi} Not only one form of the public ministry, such as the pastorate, has been instituted by God, however. Similarly, the Bible tells us that God instituted government (Ro 13:1-7), but it does not tell us that he instituted any one particular form of government. Whether we live under a president, king, dictator or some other kind of authority, we are to honor, obey and pray for our rulers (1 Tm 2:1,2). Regarding the public ministry Luther points out, “All who are engaged in the clerical office or ministry of the Word are in a holy, proper, good, and God-pleasing order and estate, such as those who preach, administer the sacraments, supervise the common chest, sextons and messengers or servants who serve such persons.”^{xxii}

Qualifications for the Public Ministry

Not all Christians have the necessary qualifications for the work of the public ministry. God spells out the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The qualifications for an overseer include an unimpeachable moral character, a good reputation and the ability to teach. A thorough knowledge of Scripture is an obvious requirement. The qualifications for a deacon are similar except that a deacon does not need the ability to teach since teaching is not one of his duties. It is self-evident, of course, that just as an overseer, who has a teaching responsibility, must have the ability to do that kind of work, so also those who are entrusted with other types of public ministry must have the necessary skills to carry out the duties of their office.

The Laying on of Hands

The apostolic church, as we see from Scripture, in Christian liberty adopted the Old Testament ceremony of laying hands on those who were chosen to serve in the public ministry (Ac 6:1-6; 13:2,3; 1 Tm 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tm 1:6). This ceremony was symbolic. It did not confer the office; that was conferred by the call. But, accompanied by prayer, it represented visually the fact that the responsibilities of the office were being entrusted to the one called and that the church was confident that the Lord would bestow his blessing and give the gifts needed for the work.

The New Testament describes what the apostolic church did, but it does not command us to follow this practice. It does not impose any ceremonial rules and regulations on the church (Ga 5:1). We are free to use this ceremony or not to use it.

Many Kinds of Public Ministry

The tasks of the public ministry are diverse. The Bible mentions such activities as feeding (Jn 21:15-17), shepherding (1 Pe 5:2), teaching (1 Tm 3:2), keeping watch (Ac 20:28), commanding (1 Tm 4:11), urging (1 Tm 6:2), warning (Ac 20:31), caring for the church (1 Tm 3:5), directing the affairs of the church, (1 Tm 5:17), leading (He 13:7,17), preaching, correcting, rebuking, encouraging (2 Tm 4:2), baptizing (1 Cor 1:17)—the list is almost endless.

It is obvious that no one individual can perform all the functions of the public ministry. In our day the most comprehensive form of the public ministry is the pastorate. But there are many aspects of the New Testament ministry a pastor does not and is not called to perform. The larger a congregation and a church body become, the greater is the need to create new offices to take care of all the work that needs to be done to carry out the New Testament ministry.

Not all offices directly involve the preaching and teaching of God's Word. The work of the almoners in the congregation at Jerusalem differed in that respect from the work of the apostles. Also those offices that are not directly involved with the Word, serve in various ways, however, to benefit the church and help it indirectly to carry out its one task, the ministry of the gospel. Those offices that directly involve the preaching and teaching of God's Word are, as the Apology says, "the highest office in the Church."^{xxiii} But the others are important too, and those who do such work well are worthy of double honor (1 Tm 5:17).

When the church sees a need and creates an office, the Lord also gives the church people who are qualified for the office. Today in addition to pastors we have, teachers on the elementary, secondary, college and seminary levels, synodical executives and administrators, missionaries, chaplains serving the military and various kinds of institutions, including college and university campuses, ministers of music, education, evangelism, youth and family life, editors, giving counselors and others. These are usually full-time workers who receive a salary (1 Cor 9:14; Ga 6:6). Also teachers in our Christian schools who are not called to teach the Word of God as such but subjects like mathematics and science are serving the church in the public ministry. In a Christian school all teaching is done from a Christian point of view. In such a school there are no so-called secular subjects. All subjects are taught in the light of God's holy Word. All teachers in such a school are called by the church and render a service to the church that is blessing to its children and young people.

In addition, we have in the church today many part-time workers such as Sunday school and vacation Bible school teachers, elders, people who serve on various committees and boards, and the like. These are usually unpaid positions, but they are also ministries. They contribute to the functioning of the church in carrying out its gospel ministry.

Women in the Public Ministry

These ministries, both full-time and part-time, are also open to women when the God-ordained relationship between men and women is observed (Gn 2:18; 1 Cor 11:3-16; 14:33-38). In the apostolic church there were many women who are commended in the New Testament for their service to the Lord and to his church. We think of the women Paul mentions in his Epistle to the Romans (ch. 16) such as Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea; Priscilla, the wife of Aquila; a certain Mary, who worked very hard for the congregation at Rome; Tryphena and Tryphosa, who are also described as hard workers in the Lord; Julia and Nereus's sister; the four daughters of Philip the evangelist who prophesied (Ac 21:9). The names of these women and others are honorably recorded for all time in the Holy Scriptures. While not all of them were necessarily in the public ministry of the church, some undoubtedly were.

Under ordinary circumstances it would be contrary to God's order of creation for a woman to serve as pastor of a congregation. God wants men to be the leaders. It is important to note, however, that there is no absolute prohibition in Scripture forbidding women to speak or teach in the church. Only when their speaking or teaching involves exercising authority over men is it contrary to God's law (1 Tm 2:12; 1 Cor 14:37). On Pentecost Peter cited the Lord's promise through Joel, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy" (Ac 2:17; Jl 2:28). In fact, as Luther points out, "If no man were to preach, then it would be necessary for the women to preach."^{xxiv} Only the Lord knows the names of the thousands of women who have served or are serving our church today in our many different kinds of Christian schools and in other areas of Christian public ministry. We thank God for them and for their willing and faithful service may he reward them richly!

The Distinction between the Universal Priesthood and the Public Ministry

As we have seen, the work of the public ministry is essentially the same as the ministry entrusted to all Christians. It is the work of Preaching the gospel. Individual Christians do it personally as royal priests. Those in the public ministry do it in the name and on behalf of those who have called them. This includes, of course, the administration of the sacraments. Just as every Christian has the authority and obligation to preach the gospel to all creation, so also every Christian has the authority to perform the sacraments; otherwise it could not be delegated to those in the public ministry. But because God is a God of order (1 Cor 14:33,40) who wants his people to do everything they do in a spirit of love (1 Cor 16:14), the conducting of public worship services, public preaching and the administration of the sacraments is ordinarily performed by those who are called to do this work. In emergencies or special circumstances lay Christians may, of course, perform a baptism, or, when asked, conduct a service, deliver a sermon, or distribute communion. Our Confessions therefore correctly teach that “in a case of necessity even a layman absolves, and becomes the minister and pastor of another; as Augustine narrates the story of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the catechumen, who after Baptism then absolved the baptizer.”^{xxv}

With Scripture, Luther makes a clear distinction between the universal priesthood of all believers and the office of the public ministry. This distinction lies in the call by which certain individuals are chosen for the public ministry. Luther writes:

Every baptized Christian is, and ought to be, called a priest...However, we deal with a different matter when we speak of those who have an office in the Christian Church, such as minister [*Kirchendiener*] preacher, pastor, or curate [*Seelsorger*]...They are to be separated from the common mass of Christians in the same way as in secular government, where certain people of the citizenry or municipality are chosen and appointed as officials...This is the way it is in Christendom, too...Out of the multitude of Christians some must be selected who shall lead the others by virtue of the special gifts and aptitude which God gives them for the office...For although we are all priests, this does not mean that all of us can preach, teach, and rule. Certain ones of the multitude must be selected and separated for such an office. And, he who has such an office is not a priest because of his office but a servant of all the others, who are priests. When he is no longer able to preach and serve, or if he no longer wants to do so, he once more becomes a part of the common multitude of Christians...This is the way to distinguish between the office of preaching, or the ministry, and the general priesthood of all baptized Christians. The preaching office is no more than a public service which happens to be conferred upon someone by the entire congregation, all the members of which are priests.^{xxvi}

For 141 years our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod has been permitted to play a role in Christ's work of building his church. As a church body made up of weak, imperfect Christians, our synod has its faults. We need not dwell on them. Rather, we ought to lift our hearts and bend our knees in thanksgiving to our gracious God for giving us the privilege of being a part of this church “in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered,”^{xxvii} a church where our Souls are nourished with wholesome spiritual food, and not fed the dry husks of human wisdom. Awed by God's amazing grace and inspired with thankful love, should we not apply ourselves with renewed zeal to the mission and ministry our

Savior has entrusted to us? As this 20th century draws to a close and we consider the billions of our fellow human beings who are on the road to eternal death because they do not know Jesus as their Savior, should we not ask God for a greater measure of dedication and energy to do as we sing:

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim
Till all the world adore his sacred name!

Paul's words addressed to the Corinthian Christians are meant also for us: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:58). Amen.

ⁱ *Luther's Works* (LW) (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-86), 41, 314; *Dr. Martin Luthers Saemmtliche Schriften* (SL) (St. Louis: Concordia, 1880-), XVII, 1071.

ⁱⁱ Part III, Art. XII, 2; *Concordia Triglotta*, 499.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Large Catechism*, The Creed, Art. III, 48; *Triglotta*, 691.

^{iv} *Small Catechism*, The Use of the Keys and Confession.

^v LW 17, 225; SL VI, 627.

^{vi} LW 26, 232; SL IX, 308.

^{vii} *Large Catechism*, The Creed, Art. III, 51, 52; *Triglotta*, 691.

^{viii} Art. VII and VIII, 20; *Triglotta*, 233.

^{ix} Art. VII, 2; *Triglotta*, 479.

^x Art. VII and VIII, 20; *Triglotta*, 233.

^{xi} Art. V, 1; *Triglotta*, 45.

^{xii} Part III, Art. VIII, 3; *Triglotta*, 495.

^{xiii} Art. V, 2, 3; *Triglotta*, 45.

^{xiv} Art. V, 1; *Triglotta*, 45.

^{xv} Thor. Decl., XII, 30; *Triglotta*, 1101.

^{xvi} Part III, Art. IV; *Triglotta*, 491.

^{xvii} LW 36, 149; SL XIX, 1086.

^{xviii} LW 40, 389-393; SL XX, 1772-1676.

^{xix} *Triglotta*, 49.

^{xx} Smalcald Articles, Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops, 67; *Triglotta*, 523.

^{xxi} Art. XIII, 12; *Triglotta*, 311.

^{xxii} LW 37, 364; SL XX, 1098.

^{xxiii} Art. XV, 43; *Triglotta*, 327.

^{xxiv} LW 36, 152; SL XIX, 1090.

^{xxv} Smalcald Articles, Of the Power and Jurisdiction of Bishops, 67, *Triglotta*, 523.

^{xxvi} LW 13, 330-332; SL V, 1035-1038. See also LW 36, 149, 159; SL XIX, 1086, 1097f.

^{xxvii} Augsburg Confession, Art. VII, 2; *Triglotta*, 479.