

Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men?

A Study of the Augustana, Articles XII-XV, in Light of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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No congregation in the early Christian Church had more problems than the congregation in Corinth. After all, of which other of his readers did Paul ever have to sternly inquire: “What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a whip, or in love and with a gentle spirit?” (1 Co 4:21)? These Corinthians had issues. So many issues, in fact, that from our twenty-first century perspective it’s almost surprising that Paul would continue to address them as “brothers.” His pastoral patience with these wayward Christians is nothing short of astounding.

And what were the root causes of the difficulties at Corinth, other than – of course – the devil, the world, and their own sinful flesh? What were the sources of trouble, dogmatically speaking? A major part of the problem was this: the Corinthians were having difficulty properly distinguishing between the institution of God and the institutions of men. To use more contemporary language – and for our purposes today – you might say that they were having “worship wars” and quarrels over questions of church and ministry.

First of all, these Corinthians were not properly acknowledging the institution of God – that is, the gospel – in worship and ministry or appreciating enough its vital place in the life of the church. They were despising *the public ministry of the gospel* (AC XIV) – something instituted by God himself – to such a degree that Paul finally needed to remind them “to regard us [public ministers] as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God” (1 Co 4:1). As a congregation and as individual Christians, they were not properly carrying out their responsibilities in using *the keys to bind and loose sins* – something instituted by God himself (1 Co 5:1-13). As a congregation and as individual Christians they were not always using *the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion* (AC XIII) – things instituted by God himself – according to the command and institution of Christ (1 Co 11:17-33; 15:29).

Instead, they spent their time arguing with St. Paul about non-essentials. “Everything is permissible,” (1 Co 6:12; 10:23) they cried out in defense of their indefensible position. They were referring to their *own* institutions – the institutions of men – particularly as those institutions related to worship and ministry (1 Co 6; 8-10; 11:2-16; 14). They were confused about what we today call adiaphora, those things neither forbidden nor commanded by God (AC XV). They were confused as to how they might best exercise their Christian liberty. Instead of surrendering that freedom in willing and loving submission to other, “weaker” Christians, some Corinthians self-righteously asserted it – demanded it even! – without thinking about the consequences to their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Co 8:9-13), while others attempted to bind the consciences of “stronger” Christians and undermine their Christian liberty (1 Co 10:25ff.).

What answer did St. Paul have for these problems in Corinth? It was simple, yet profound. The gospel was the answer. It alone is our spiritual remedy. Paul emphasized that the Corinthians needed to properly understand the nature of God’s institution, the nature of the gospel. God’s institution, the gospel, Paul wrote, “is foolishness,” at least “to those who are perishing” (1 Co 1:18). In addition to being foolish, Paul said the gospel seems weak, lowly, despised, non-existent, powerless. Still, it is this institution of God that alone can be trusted to accomplish the work he has given his Church. After all, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (1 Co 1:27-29). They needed to trust the power of gospel, even though it seemed so foolish, so weak. On the other hand, while the institutions of men seem so wise, so powerful, and so successful, Paul

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reminded the Corinthians that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight” (1 Co 3:19). The institutions of men cannot be trusted, whatever they might be, to accomplish the work he has given his church.

Interestingly enough, first-century Corinth is a microcosm of the Christian and Lutheran church of today. Two of the hottest topics these days are worship and ministry. Why? Mainly because they are so visible. People *see* worship and ministry. They are the most visible aspects of any church’s doctrine and practice. On that basis alone people will often quickly judge whether they “like a church or not,” even though much of what people see is actually human invention, adiaphora. But they will make judgments like: “That’s Catholic!” or “That’s Baptist!” thinking that those two things are mutually exclusive. Regarding institutions of men, perhaps they are. Regarding the institutions of God, sadly, they are not. As far as the gospel institutions of our Savior are concerned, we will see that Baptists and Catholics are tragically similar in their legalistic approach.¹ Instead we must teach others – and ourselves! – to make sober-minded judgments about worship and ministry practices based upon a proper, biblical distinction between the institution of God and the institutions of men.

It has often been said that the teaching of the true church stands or falls based on a proper distinction of law and gospel. But if we Lutherans, by the grace of God, are to endure in the truth of that distinction we must also properly distinguish between the institution of God and the institutions of men. In our own synod, matters of worship and ministry are being debated more and more regularly. It may not yet be a full-scale “war,” as it is in other Lutheran and Christian church bodies in America, but there certainly have been battles. The purpose of this essay is to remind us all that we must continually ask a fundamental question when considering issues of worship and ministry: what of God and what of men? What things has God instituted and how has he instituted them, and what things have men instituted? As we shall see, these are vitally important issues for the well-being of the Church. God does not necessarily promise to bless human institutions. He does, however, promise always to bless his own (Is 55:10-11).² We will also be reminded that whenever the Church has forgotten that during its history – whenever she has emphasized the institutions of men over the institution of God – problems quickly ensued.

I. What Of God?

There really is only one answer to the question: what of God in worship and ministry? The one grand institution of God is the gospel. Only the gospel gives rise to genuine Christian ministry. Only the gospel inspires truly God-pleasing worship. Lutherans confess in Article V of the Augsburg Confession that in order to bring people to faith in him “God instituted the office of the ministry (*Predigtamt*), that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments.”³ During the heated Synodical Conference battles over church and ministry in the early twentieth century, our own August Pieper wrote:

One cannot dispute the fact that the preaching of the gospel is in the fullest and most intensive sense an ordinance, arrangement, institution and establishment; indeed, it is the one great general and permanent commission of the Lord in the New Testament. No command of the Lord addressed to his disciples is as great, as comprehensive, as intensive, as general, as permanent as this one. It is the great kingdom commission of the Lord addressed to every believer, to the entire church, and in effect until his return. This is to such a degree the one great arrangement of the New Testament that the preaching of the gospel has rightly been called the one task of the church. ... If we have carried out only this command with everything that we think, imagine, speak and do, we have fulfilled every will of God.⁴

¹ Both Roman Catholic and Baptist doctrine are Semi-Pelagian and inherently legalistic, denying the power of the gospel alone to engender faith and works. Instead they trust human institutions and make laws, as we shall see.

² In making reference to Isaiah 55:10-11, the author would caution his readers to remember that the Lord never promises that his Word will always bring people to faith, but it “will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” Sometimes the result is to harden hearts, as in the case of Pharaoh.

³ Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord*, 31.

⁴ August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. II (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 121. Hereafter referred to as “Legal Regulations?”

In the New Testament age this one grand institution of God is offered to us in three primary outward forms: through the ministry of the Word (preaching and teaching), through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, and through the sacred elements and Word of Holy Communion. The Word and Sacraments are special institutions given by Christ for the awakening and strengthening of faith in his New Testament Church. In sum, they are the gospel, God's one grand institution.

The Use of the Sacraments (AC XIII): It is taught among us that the sacraments were instituted not only to be signs by which people might be identified outwardly as Christians, but that they are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith. For this reason they require faith, and they are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith.⁵

The sacraments are the institution of God. When they are administered, the gospel is administered. The Lutheran church is mostly alone within Christendom in its proper understanding of the sacraments and their use. That is evident from Scripture, our Confession, and the confessions of others. Two errors are treated in this article, one of which is typically Protestant in nature, the other of which is typically Roman Catholic in nature. Between these two errors runs the narrow Lutheran middle road.

First to be treated is the Protestant idea that the sacraments serve only as "signs by which people might be identified outwardly as Christians." This is certainly not to deny that the sacraments do serve as "marks" of the Church; Lutherans confessed that at Augsburg as well (AC VII). The key word here is "*only*." That was the contention of Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and his followers: that the sacraments were *only* identifying signs of the Church, nothing more.

Scripture disagrees. Jesus proclaimed that his body and blood were given in Holy Communion "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26:28). On the first Pentecost Peter declared that his repentant listeners should be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Ac 2:38). Yes, the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion *are* identifying signs of the Christian Church, but they are so much more. "They are signs and testimonies of God's will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening our faith." They work the forgiveness of sin, Luther confessed in his Small Catechism. They deliver from death and the devil. They give eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare. Foolishness? Most certainly. But God's institution for the awakening and strengthening of faith? Absolutely. To rob the sacraments of their promises is to rob them of their essence, and it makes their use useless.

The second error to be treated in this article is Roman Catholic in nature, the idea that the sacraments confer God's grace even when received without faith (*ex opere operato*).⁶ This ultimately makes these God-given gifts into *sacrifices* (something we do for God), robbing them of their real nature as *sacraments* (something that God offers and does for us). In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Philipp Melancthon comments:

It is sheer Judaism to believe that we are justified by a ceremony without a good disposition in our heart, that is, without faith. Yet this ungodly and wicked notion is taught with great authority throughout the papal realm. In opposition to this, Paul denies that Abraham was justified by circumcision [something *he* did], but says that circumcision was a sign given to exercise faith [something *God* did based on *his* promises]. Thus we teach that in using the sacraments there must be a faith which believes these promises and accepts that which is promised and offered in the sacrament.⁷

"For this reason they require faith," we Lutherans state in our Confession. But someone might ask: why then do you baptize infants? Do they have the *prerequisite* faith when they are baptized? No. But we have

⁵ Tappert, op. cit., 35-36.

⁶ The now-famous Latin term of thirteenth century invention which means "simply by the work having been worked." The Council of Trent (1547) stated the still current position: "If anyone shall say that by the said sacraments of the New Law, grace is not conferred from the work which has been worked [*ex opere operato*], but that faith alone in the divine promise suffices to obtain grace: let him be anathema" (DS 1608, as quoted in *The Companion to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994], 423).

⁷ Tappert, op. cit., 213.

God's promise that when the sacraments are used according to their institution – in connection with the gospel – they promise *and give* the very faith they require. Melancthon addressed this very question from Scripture in the Apology: “Through the Word and the rite God simultaneously moves the heart to believe and take hold of faith, as Paul says (Rom. 10:17), ‘Faith comes from what is heard.’”⁸

However, we must also guard against falling into an *ex opere operato* idea when discussing the sacraments. We must remember that the gospel does not work irresistibly. In AC V we confess that through the gospel God “gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the gospel.”⁹ Sometimes the gospel indeed hardens hearts, as we see from the call given to the prophet Isaiah (Is 6:9-10). This is not said to deny the power of Baptism to work faith in the hearts of children or anyone else. It can and certainly does. Instead it is said to remind us all how important it is to preach about and to *daily* remind Christians of the promises given in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. We need to keep those promises ever before the eyes of our children, as well as our own. The sacraments are not tetanus shots!¹⁰ They are the promises of God connected to water, wheat, and wine. They require faith(!) and “are rightly used when they are received in faith and for the purpose of strengthening faith.”

The sacraments are the institution of God. Along with the preaching and teaching of the Word, they are the center and focus of worship. They are the gospel, pure and simple. The gospel is from God. Trust it. It works. God says so.



Order in the Church (AC XIV): It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call.¹¹

The public ministry of the gospel is the institution of God. Public preaching of the gospel is inextricably connected with the ministry of the gospel. The proclamation and administration of the gospel in Word and Sacrament is its very essence.

But before we go too far in defining *public* ministry, we must first come to a conclusion concerning ministry. What is ministry? It's a difficult word to get a handle on because of its various uses in the English language over the course of the last five hundred years. Professor John Brug writes:

What is the proper use of the terms “minister” and “ministry?” This has been quite a problem for English speakers because the popular use of the words “minister” and “ministry” has changed since the time of the King James Bible of 1611, which was the standard Bible in the English-speaking world for more than three centuries. The English word “minister” like its Latin parent was originally a synonym of the word “servant.” At the time of the King James translation, the word “minister” referred to servants of every sort. Gradually however, “minister” came to be used almost entirely as a technical term for two types of service. English dictionaries usually list “clergyman” or “pastor” as the number one meaning of “minister.” The other main meaning of “minister” is a government official like the Prime Minister of England.¹²

Many people lay responsibility for these semantic difficulties at the doorstep of Oscar Feucht, who boldly proclaimed “everyone a minister” in 1974.¹³ Brug comments that we must “warn against a simplistic parroting of the claim, ‘Everyone is a minister’” although this claim can “be properly understood.” Still, if we are going to use the term “minister” or “ministry” in its wider, older sense, Brug states that “we must make it clear to our parishioners that we are returning to a wider usage of the term ‘minister’ than that which has been common in the recent past.”¹⁴

⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁹ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰ That's exactly how the Roman church views them (*gratia infusa*). Many Lutherans unfortunately treat the sacraments, particularly Baptism, the same way. They get their children baptized and then figure that their job is complete.

¹¹ Tappert, op. cit., 36.

¹² John Brug, “The Scriptural Use of the Terms ‘Ministry’ and ‘Minister,’” 1.

¹³ Oscar Feucht, *Everyone a Minister* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974).

¹⁴ John Brug, “Doctrinal Challenges Facing Lutheranism in the 21st Century,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (Winter 2001): 15.

Simply put, ministry means service. The Greek noun is *διακονία*. That word and its derivatives are used in Scripture to describe all kinds of different service: waiting on tables (Ac 6:2), the work of the government (Ro 13:4), monetary support (Lk 8:3), the work of Jesus (Mt 20:28), and the work of the apostles (Ac 6:4). It is also true that the translators of the King James Version used the word *ministry* “as almost a one-for-one equivalent of *διακονία*.”¹⁵

But as Professor Brug pointed out, today “ministry” generally means something different than it did in 1611. Over time “ministry” became more exclusive in its meaning. It finally came to describe the peculiar work of the Church, particularly the duties of Christian pastors and teachers. And what is the work of the Church? Jesus tells us: “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). *The* ministry of the Church is to proclaim the gospel, God’s institution. It is not to wait on tables. It is not to cut the church’s lawn. It is not to coach the girls’ basketball team. It is to use the Means of Grace, to proclaim the good news about Jesus. Nothing more; nothing less.

That is why the term “ministry” is appropriately reserved in our Confession and in our circles to include a use of “the Gospel and the sacraments” (AC V). The Church’s only mission is the proclamation of the gospel. The Church’s ministry revolves solely around the Means of Grace. This is the one office¹⁶ (task) of the ministry instituted by God: to preach and teach the gospel and to administer the sacraments, and this not simply in some abstract sense, but in the concrete sense.¹⁷ In other words, it’s a *real* job given to *real* people.

And to whom has God given this office (task) – the office of proclaiming the gospel (*Predigtamt*) – even in the most concrete sense of the term? Not only to a select few within his Church, but to *every* Christian. This has not always been a popular idea.¹⁸ Even in the Wisconsin Synod it has not always been the prevailing opinion. It was only in the days of the Wauwatosa theologians – namely, Professors Joh. Ph. Koehler, August Pieper, and John Schaller, who all served at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, from 1908-1920 – that this truth of Scripture became better understood and ultimately our synod’s official confession. J.P. Koehler pioneered the fresh historical and exegetical study and led the discussion at Wauwatosa; August Pieper did the bulk of the writing, defending our confession in the pages of the *Theologische Quartalschrift*.¹⁹

¹⁵ John Brug, personal email, January 27, 2001.

¹⁶ The German word *Amt* has caused much confusion in our day. “*Amt*, like *ministerium*, is a word that can refer to a function or an office” (Thomas Nass, “The Revised *This We Believe* of the WELS on the Ministry,” *Logia* [Holy Trinity 2001]: 31). The English word “office” itself can refer to a task or to a position. In this particular instance, as in the case of the WELS theses on ministry, “office” refers to the task of the Church, proclaiming the gospel.

¹⁷ Some would say that while according to Scripture all Christians technically have the “right” to preach, teach, and administer the sacraments, this is only an *abstract* right, and that they don’t *really* hold this *concrete* office of the ministry. To this contention Schaller responded: “The ministry has never existed *in abstracto* as little as marriage has existed *in abstracto*. These things were created by God as something concrete, something that can be apprehended. ... Christians are not only *de iure* [legally] preachers of the gospel, but also carry on this ministry *de facto* [in fact] in many ways. ... Thus every believer since the beginning of the world is according to his spiritual nature a preacher of the gospel, not only *de iure* but also *de facto*. (John Schaller, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III. [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997], 79,81,89).

¹⁸ Many in the Missouri Synod and elsewhere still contend that Wisconsin’s position is unscriptural. For example, LCMS Professor David Scaer incorrectly charges that in the WELS view “no distinction is made between St. Paul and the believer and a specific institution of the ministry cannot be detected in the words of Jesus” (“The Integrity of the Christological Character of the Office of the Ministry,” *Logia* [January 1993]: 15).

¹⁹ Although Koehler allowed Pieper to represent the Wauwatosa faculty position and even commented that “Pieper’s articles cover the whole subject in minute detail and provide Synod’s source material for the study of the discussion” (*The History of the Wisconsin Synod* [St. Cloud, Minnesota: Sentinel Publishing Co. for the Prot stant Conference, 1970], 238.; hereafter referred to as *History*), one senses that Koehler was never totally satisfied with Pieper’s presentation. In his introduction to Koehler’s synodical history, editor Leigh Jordahl writes: “(Koehler) intended to emphasize the freedom of the Gospel to create its own forms in keeping with its historical situation. At the same time any form if it serves the Gospel is of divine institution. Koehler’s position is distinctly charismatic rather than juridical. When reading Pieper on the subject one cannot help but be bothered by a tendency which appears like substituting one dogmatic position for another” (xix). Indeed, Koehler himself once snapped at Pieper: “As long

The previous generation of Wisconsin theologians had held a differing opinion. Professors Adolph Hoenecke and August Ernst, the presidents of our Seminary and Northwestern College, respectively, both held the opinion that the one office or ministry (position) instituted by God was the ministry of the pastor. While Hoenecke was open to study, Ernst adamantly opposed any and all theological reorientation on the issue. For all intents and purposes both made the German words *Predigtamt* (preaching ministry) and *Pfarramt* (pastoral ministry) synonyms.²⁰ In response to this opinion, John Schaller would later write:

We have to free ourselves from the thought that only official public proclaiming [by a pastor] is gospel preaching. This false view betrays itself immediately when one simply identifies the ministry [*Predigtamt*] with the pastoral ministry [*Pfarramt*], even when the clear presentation of thoughts demands something else, as for example, if one takes the sentence, “The ministry [*Predigtamt*] is the only office [*Amt*] that Christ ordained in his church,” and construes it without further thought as if it were speaking exclusively about the pastoral office. Our studies, which have adhered strictly to what is set forth in the Holy Scriptures, incontrovertibly show that the ministry, that is, the commission to preach the gospel, is given to every Christian; that at conversion not only the ability but also the impetus for this preaching is implanted in him; and that the gospel by its very nature as a *message* presupposes this preaching activity and at the same time by the effect it has guarantees it will occur.²¹

A generation later from Thiensville, Professor John Meyer would concur with the Wauwatosa men: “Christ assigned one task to his church on earth: to *teach* and to *administer the Sacraments*. A glorious work this is, for it means the saving of souls. He assigned the task to every Christian alike, whether he be old or young, rich or poor, man, woman, or child. All have equal rights; all are equally interested.”²²

Longtime Wisconsin Synod historian and professor Edward Fredrich comments that “the three Wauwatosa teachers had not set themselves an easy task in this effort to change traditional thinking. . . . The strongest and longest opposition came from the Synodical Conference brethren in the Missouri Synod.”²³ To this day the official LCMS position is that God has instituted only one ministry (*Predigtamt*), namely, the pastoral ministry (*Pfarramt*). Their official website declares: “With respect to the doctrine of the ministry . . . our Synod has held that the office [position] of the public ministry (the pastoral office) according to the Scrip-

as you and Schaller do not clearly declare yourselves for my [exegetical] interpretation, you shall not be able to maintain your dogmatic position” (John Ph. Koehler, *Reminiscences*).

²⁰ Famed Missouri Synod theologian C.F.W. Walther *seems* to do the same thing in his *Theses on Church and Ministry*. August Pieper commented: “We do not consider Walther’s identification of the public preaching office [*Predigtamt*] with the pastoral office [*Pfarramt*] as a happy one” (“Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry,” *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997], 193.) Koehler seems to go a step further: “In the last few years the faculty of the Wauwatosa Seminary has come out in favor of a presentation of the doctrine of church and office which appears opposed to the position held by Walther. Walther identified the pastorate [*Pfarramt*] with the preaching ministry [*Predigtamt*] and gave greater prominence to the local congregation than to other church bodies, claiming a separate special divine institution for both” (*Lehrbuch der Kirchengeschichte* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1917], 712. Hereafter referred to as *Kirchengeschichte*). Recent Wisconsin Synod studies have attempted to reconcile the writings of Walther with the Wauwatosa position (cf. Carl Lawrenz, “An Evaluation of Walther’s Theses on the Church and Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* [Spring 1982]: 85-139), prompting John Brug to write: “The WELS would also maintain that our position is in agreement with that of Walther and that his position has not been correctly understood by some of his followers; nor has enough attention been given to the circumstances which he was addressing in his writings. In some places we would not word things the same way Walther did, but we have no disagreement with his doctrinal position” (“Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* [Winter 1994]: 41. Hereafter referred to as “Current Debate”). Perhaps nowhere did Walther more clearly align himself with the later Wauwatosa position than when he wrote: “The Apology does not have Grabau’s understanding according to which ‘the office of the ministry’ (*Predigtamt*) is always equivalent to ‘the office of a pastor’ (*Pfarramt*), so that therefore the words of the 28th article of the Augsburg Confession: ‘These gifts cannot be obtained except through the office of preaching’ are equivalent to saying that without the office of the pastor a person cannot obtain either faith or forgiveness of sins or salvation! No, when our old teachers ascribe such great things to the office of the ministry, they thereby mean nothing else than the service of the Word, in whatever way (*Weise*) it may come to us (*Essays for the Church*, Vol. I [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992], 102).

²¹ Schaller, *op. cit.*, 81.

²² John Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 188-189.

²³ Edward Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 110.

tures is the one divinely established office [position] in the church.” The WELS Theses on Ministry agree that “Christ instituted one office in his Church,” but that this one office or ministry is not simply the pastoral ministry (a position); it is instead “the ministry of the gospel”²⁴ (a task) held in common by all Christians. Every Christian is a holder of the *Predigtamt*.

Throughout his career as a reformer Martin Luther would define the *Predigtamt* as the gospel-preaching *task* given to all Christians. This was especially true when he was opposing Rome’s insistence that the *Amt* be defined strictly as a priestly *position* held only by ordained clergy. Luther wrote in 1523:

We maintain firmly that there is no other Word of God than that alone which all Christians are told to proclaim; that there is no Baptism than that which all Christians may administer; that there is no other observance of the Lord’s Supper than that which belongs to every Christian and was instituted by Christ to be kept; also that there is no other kind of sin than that which every Christian may bind or loose, etc.²⁵

So if that’s the case – if all Christians share the task of administering Word and Sacrament equally – then why don’t we have a different preacher every week? Why don’t all Christians baptize? Why don’t all Christians administer the sacrament of Holy Communion? We find our answer in Augustana XIV: “It is taught among us that nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call.” This article concerns the *public* ministry of the gospel, the institution of God.

The key word of this article is “publicly.” What exactly does “public” mean? Professor Koehler explains the Latin word *publice* in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*:

Publice refers to what is connected with the public, people, state, community, congregation, and is done by their authority, officially. It hasn’t anything to do with numbers, but was aimed at the enthusiasts and radicals who set themselves up as teachers in opposition to the church and state authorities, claiming that the Spirit spoke through them, without the written Word, by direct revelation, which they called the “inner word.” Thus they disturbed church worship and the peace on the thoroughfare with their demonstrations and the physical force they sometimes used to gain an audience. This public nuisance, which the Romanists laid at the door of Protestantism, was protested by the Lutherans [in Augustana XIV].²⁶

To clarify, public ministry does not refer only to ministry that is done “in public,” as we usually understand that phrase. Instead, public ministry is any ministry of the gospel that one Christian does on behalf of and in the name of other Christians. To illustrate, the United States has a *republican* form of government. That means that we send *representatives* to Washington D.C. on our behalf rather than going there ourselves to vote on every piece of legislation (i.e. democracy). Our congressional representatives are secular “public ministers.” To complete the analogy: these people are not self-appointed (“inner callings” will not get you a vote in Congress). The people must elect them.

It is essentially no different in the Church. True, every Christian possesses the *Predigtamt* (AC V), but not every Christian is a *public* minister (AC XIV). Any Christian may preach the gospel – in fact, it’s a compulsion (2 Co 4:13) – yet a congregation of Christians normally calls a pastor to do that on its behalf. Any Christian may teach the good news of Jesus to children, yet a congregation normally calls Sunday school teachers to do that on its behalf. Any Christian may properly administer the sacraments, yet an assembly of Christians normally calls a pastor to do that on its behalf. Every Christian has the right and responsibility to use the keys, yet often a congregation elects – yes, calls! – elders to use those keys on its behalf when dealing with straying members. Pastors, teachers, elders – and anyone else who uses the gospel on behalf of and in the name of the church – these people are public ministers of the gospel.

²⁴ “Theses on the Church and Ministry,” *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1997), 48. This said, some WELS theologians are still concerned that these theses are not entirely clear in their exegesis and definitions (e.g., cf. Joel Fredrich, “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry,” unpublished essay, 42-44). Two words, “office” and “institution” (cf. footnotes 32 and 45), have caused special difficulties.

²⁵ Martin Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, 34-35.

²⁶ Koehler, *History*, 232.

And why aren't all Christians, all of whom possess the ministry of the gospel, also public or representative ministers of that gospel? There are two reasons, both of which ultimately have to do with divine prerogative. First of all, not every Christian is a public minister because God has not given everyone the gifts to carry out the *Predigtamt* on behalf of others. And secondly, even if some Christian might have the necessary gifts, God must first ask or call that Christian to use the gospel on behalf of and in the name of the Church. Paul asked the Corinthians: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?" (1 Co 12:29), these being examples of public ministers. The answer was a resounding "no." And why? Because "God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Co 12:18). Not all the parts of our bodies have the same gifts or "calling." In the same way, the Holy Spirit has arranged the body of Christ, the Church, just as he wanted it to be through the working of the gospel (1 Co 12:11). To some he has given special gifts for gospel ministry, and through the Church he has called those same people to serve other Christians publicly. First, through the gifts given by God and then by the call of God through the Church, Christians become public ministers.

To put it another way: God institutes the public ministry *through the gospel*.²⁷ The public ministry of the gospel is not of human invention, nor is it instituted simply for the sake of order or mere expediency.²⁸ On the other hand, neither is it an institution based on some legalistic, divine command (*mandatum Dei*), as many claim.²⁹ Instead the New Testament public ministry is the natural, evangelical, divinely instituted, and Spirit-wrought outgrowth of the gospel ministry commonly held by all Christians.³⁰ Christians naturally serve one another with the gospel according to their God-given gifts, just as Peter wrote: "Each one should use whatever gift (*χάρισμα*) he has received to serve (*διακονοῦντες*) others, faithfully administering God's grace (*χάριτος*) in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pe 4:10,11). Paul adds that "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good* [emphasis added]" (1 Co 12:7). God gives some Christians spiritual gifts for the purpose of serving others with the gospel in Christian love. And when God calls such Christians through the Church to use the gospel in their stead, they fulfill that service as public (representative) ministers of the gospel. The Holy Spirit institutes – he *creates* and *sets in motion* – such public ministry entirely through the power and working of the gospel.³¹ Divine law is not a preeminent force or motive for gospel ministry or the institutions of God in general.

August Pieper echoes Paul's first-century line of thought from 1 Corinthians 12 in his own treatise, "Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?" published in 1916:

God has not appointed the members of the natural [human] body through precept or command or regulation, but "appointed," created them through his counsel and almighty creative act. In just the same way he has also "appointed" the various *charismata* in the spiritual body of Christ. Here we have creation through

²⁷ Luther wrote that "Christians know very well that the spiritual estate (*Der geistliche stand*) has been established and instituted by God, not with gold or silver but with the precious blood and bitter death of his only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . He dearly paid that men might everywhere have this office of preaching (*Predigtamt*), baptizing, loosing, binding, giving the sacrament, comforting, warning, and exhorting with God's word" ("A Sermon on Keeping Children in School," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 46, 219-220).

²⁸ This was Erlangen professor Johann Höfling's (1802-1853) opinion in the mid-nineteenth century. Opponents of the WELS position sometimes charge us with being Höflingites or crypto-Höflingites.

²⁹ This was the position of LCMS professor Franz Pieper in opposition to the Wauwatosa approach defended by his younger brother August (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953], 443-449). The issue of a *mandatum Dei* continues to be a considerable sticking point today, as it deals with the fundamental question of a proper distinction between law and gospel, particularly the third use of the law.

³⁰ A prime example of this evangelical arrangement and development is the public ministry of St. Paul, who describes his calling into the public ministry in very evangelical terms. Paul says that he "became a servant (*διάκονος*) of this gospel by the gift of God's grace (*χάριτος*) given me through the working (*ἐνεργειαν*) of his power" (Eph 3:7). No mention is made of a *mandatum Dei*. Instead the Holy Spirit *works* through the *grace* of the *gospel*. As a result, Paul's compulsion to be a *servant* was an evangelical one (1 Co 9:16ff.).

³¹ To avoid the idea of a *mandatum Dei* in using the legal term "institution" Professor Joh. Ph. Koehler once wrote: "With the word 'institute' (*stiften*) we want to indicate that God has *set in motion* the preaching of the gospel on earth through the gift of the gospel, nothing more, nothing less" (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 10 [1913]: 300-301).

the Holy Spirit, not external prescription and regulation for the church. The church merely carries out what the Holy Spirit gives and creates. ... Today the Lord gives similar or other gifts, in lesser or greater variety. But we can be certain that today and at all times he gives the church those gifts, offices, and forms of office which it in every age and every place needs. ... As gifts of Christ, appointed by the Holy Spirit, [the different forms of public ministry] all carry out the one great ministry of the church, earned by Christ's blood, revealed by the Holy Spirit, and expressly commanded by Christ, the office of the Word and the sacraments.³²

God's arrangement for New Testament public ministry is entirely different from his command concerning Old Testament public ministry. In the Old Testament God had established a special priestly class, the Levites. It was a divine command, a *legal* institution of God, and as such it led to a legalistic, self-serving, and often unloving mindset among the Jews. No one could do the work of the priest except this priestly class. Paul tells us that this law, along with all the others, served as a chaperone until Christ (Ga 3:23-25). But, as with all other legal institutions of God in the Old Testament, the Levitical priesthood was perfectly fulfilled by Christ, the great High Priest, and done away with (Hebrews 7:26-28). In the New Testament, a new arrangement has been set in motion, a gospel-inspired arrangement. In other words, the New Testament ministry of the gospel is not a legal but an evangelical arrangement.³³ It is evangelically compelled (1 Co 9:16; 2 Co 5:14), rather than legalistically motivated. August Pieper explains:

If the preaching of the gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper were legal ordinances, [their function would be] to lock up and preserve until Christ would appear, and be a custodian until his coming. But the New Testament is the fullness of time, is itself Christ's appearance. It is just through these ordinances that Christ imparts himself to the world. As legal arrangements, the preaching of the gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper would be powerless, impotent ordinances not imparting salvation but killing and damning us; under them we would be frightened and yearn for other, new ordinances which would give us salvation. The proclamation of the gospel, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are not legal but *evangelical* arrangements.³⁴

This thought is key to a proper understanding of God's institution of the public ministry and all other New Testament institutions. They are evangelical. They are freely administered. The gospel doesn't just give us divine commands like the law did; instead through the gospel the Holy Spirit empowers us to fulfill the will of God. Even to speak of the New Testament institutions as mere commands of God (*mandata Dei*) is to take a wrong-headed, legalistic approach and to rob them of their vitality.³⁵ Christians who are led by the Holy Spirit don't need to be *commanded* to do the will of God. They need only to be *invited*. Jesus said, "He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit" (Jn 15:5 KJV), a promise that Jesus works through the gospel to produce proper fruits and forms in the lives of Christians.

At this point, many get uneasy. They think to themselves, "Well, if the gospel ministry is not *commanded* as such – if the sacraments are not *legally compelled* – aren't we putting their proper use at risk? Aren't we opening the door for despising them?" What these questioners overlook is Paul's assertion to the Galatians: "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (Ga 5:18). Christians do the will of God not from a legalistic compulsion, but from an evangelical one (1 Co 9:16; 2 Co 5:14). Luther put it this way:

It is therefore just as absurd and stupid when they say: The righteous person should do good works, as when they say: God should do good; the sun should shine; the pear tree should bear pears, three plus seven should be ten, since all of this follows naturally of necessity because of the thing itself and the result which is determined. Or, that I may state it more clearly and plainly: all this follows without the command and order of a single law, naturally and willingly, without force or compulsion.³⁶

³² August Pieper, "Legal Regulations?" 130-132.

³³ This is in stark contrast to the Roman Catholic and Reformed way of thinking concerning the gospel. Both make the gospel and the sacraments into a "New Law," to be fulfilled by Christians (*mandata Dei*). Why? Because both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Christian fear licentiousness. As a result, the Reformed stress that the sacraments are "ordinances" (laws; things to be done). The Roman Catholic Catechism calls the gospel "the New Law."

³⁴ August Pieper, "Legal Regulations?" 123.

³⁵ Luther certainly spoke of these institutions as *commands*, but he put much more stress on the *promises* involved.

³⁶ Quoted in August Pieper's "Difference between Reformed and Lutheran," 111.

Following Luther's line of evangelical thought, August Pieper makes this application to the New Testament institutions of God:

To be sure, [the New Testament institutions are] Christ's clear command ... [but] after we have come to know the gospel in faith, preaching, Baptism, and celebrating the Lord's Supper become for us Christians not a duty – for duty is a legal concept – but an inner compulsion. “I believe, therefore I speak,” says David. “We cannot help but speaking” says Peter. “You will be my witnesses,” says the Lord. Yet this is not a legal compulsion, but a compelling force inherent in the Christian's new spiritual nature. ... Also without the express command of Christ, the church, the assembly of believers, would have preached, baptized, and administered the Sacrament after the Lord had ordained them as means of grace. The preaching of the gospel, like prayer, is, because of the Christian's very nature, the immediate, the most immediate and necessary outpouring of faith. It is so inevitable that the stones would cry out should we keep the gospel hidden. As Christians our hearts would burst if we would not confess our own and the world's Savior and praise his soul-saving grace.³⁷

Professor Joel Fredrich summarizes the Wauwatosa approach quite nicely in a paper entitled “The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry” (1994):

A large part of Koehler's concern [a concern shared by his Wauwatosa colleagues] is that when a thing such as the preaching of the gospel has its impetus and authority in the life-creating gospel itself, we should not adopt modes of speech and thought which imply that the gospel is a poor, dead thing. We should not imagine that the ministry of the gospel would somehow lack legitimacy or authority without a separate institution or command [*mandata Dei*]. We should not suppose that gospel ministry must perish unless we can maintain it by basing it on a divine law.

A similar concern for the supremacy of the gospel led Koehler [and his colleagues] to emphasize the principle that the gospel creates its own forms as the church pursues its mission in changing circumstances. That is part of our New Testament freedom in Christ. ... Hence we should not expect God to prescribe arbitrary, external forms for ministry in the New Testament, or expect to find such forms instituted as necessary for the life of the New Testament church. The forms will take care of themselves since the gospel will move God's people to find appropriate ways of letting the good news be heard.³⁸

The Wauwatosa approach on this issue was distinctly evangelical, even “charismatic,” that is, they saw the forms as flowing from the freedom given to the church by the gospel, not from adherence to regulations of the law. However, charges of antinomianism quickly arose.³⁹ They still arise today. People want hard and fast rules! In opposing the Wauwatosa position, ELS Professor Erling Teigen alleges: “The most serious deficiency of August Pieper's view is that it calls into question whether or not there can be divine commands or *mandata Dei*, in the New Testament; ultimately, to deny such *mandata* is to lapse into Antinomianism.”⁴⁰ Teigen accuses Schaller's presentation on the subject with the exact same deficiency:

Schaller has not at all dealt with the question of any kind of divine command on which the strict rubric of Augustana XIV is based. If one follows Schaller's argumentation, the only reason for asserting Augustana XIV is pragmatic need, and whatever one comes up with, whether it be an arrangement arising from Church Growth methodology or Episcopalianism, God will approve of it so long as it is orderly.⁴¹

³⁷ August Pieper, “Legal Regulations?” 125.

³⁸ Joel Fredrich, op. cit., 14.

³⁹ Antinomianism is a heresy that has sprung up often in the life of the Church. There is evidence that Francis Pieper considered the viewpoint of the Wauwatosa men to be a form of antinomianism. The Wauwatosa men were concerned that the view of the St. Louis men tended toward legalism. Both August Pieper and Koehler make reference to Missouri's legalistic mindset throughout their writings, especially when dealing with the question of church and ministry. Nevertheless, formal public charges were never made.

⁴⁰ Erling Teigen, “The Universal Priesthood in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Logia* (October 1992): 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

Two things Teigen overlooks. First, he overlooks the fact that the Wauwatosa men certainly did state that God institutes the public ministry; he just doesn't do it in the manner Teigen suggests (i.e., by means of new, legal commands). Instead August Pieper wrote in 1929:

How does the founding of an outward church organization or institution take place? This is no human invention, but a divine ordinance and institution – although not an Old Testament legal institution (of this it has not the faintest trait), nevertheless a New Testament evangelical institution, which has its real roots in the grace of Christ and in the faith of the church. Faith must by its very nature break forth and confess.⁴²

Joh. Ph. Koehler hadn't said it any differently a decade previous. In his *Kirchengeschichte*, published in 1917, he wrote: "By the term 'institution' [*Stiftung*] is meant a divine creation of forms (pastorate, local congregation, synod, office of school teacher, office of professor, et al) through the work of the Holy Ghost in Christendom, in which with Christian freedom Christians organize these things as suited to the external existing conditions."⁴³

The second thing Teigen overlooks is that, unlike many theologians, the Wauwatosa men didn't pay mere lip service to the power of the gospel and, therefore, never felt the need to resort to the legalistic idea of *mandata Dei*. They didn't depend upon legal regulations to guide the life of the Church. Instead, they trusted the gospel and its saving and guiding power in and for the life of the Church. With Luther they deeply trusted the Holy Spirit to work through the gospel and to lead Christians even in the creation of outward forms of gospel ministry. Teigen and others, though, seem to overlook the gospel promise: "He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit" (Jn 15:5 KJV). Instead, they charge those who trust the gospel with antinomianism! In short, such people are falling into the Roman Catholic and Protestant error of making the gospel into a new law, thinking that the only way Christians will "get it right" is if God spells out every last detail for them by means of *mandata Dei*. Rather, we must trust the gospel to produce its own God-given, divinely instituted forms, understanding that they are evangelical – and not legal – arrangements. That's what the Wauwatosa men were espousing, and that takes faith.⁴⁴

Now, all of this is certainly not to suggest that we still-fleshly Christians will always fulfill the will of God perfectly in this world. We will not. Often we will not be led by the Spirit but instead by our sinful nature (Ga 5:17). At times we will be lazy, prideful, arrogant. For that reason Christ restated a Great Commission at the end of his earthly ministry that had actually been in effect since the days of Genesis 3:15 and before. However, God's legal command [the law] does in no way trump his earlier evangelical arrangement [the gospel]; it merely serves a different purpose. The law with its threats is addressed to the sinful nature rather than to the new self. Schaller explains:

⁴² August Pieper, "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and Its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline," *The Wauwatosa Theology*, Vol. III, 116.

⁴³ Koehler, *Kirchengeschichte*, 712. The definition of the word "institution" [*Stiftung*] seems to have been the fundamental point of contention between the Wauwatosa faculty and their St. Louis counterparts. Indeed Koehler writes in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*: "The real issue was the definition of the term 'institution' as applied to the church and the office of the ministry in their concrete form" (238). In his *Reminiscences* (1930), Koehler explains that he – alone at first – "emphasized exegetically that in the Scriptures no mention is made of an 'institution,' which might serve as a basis for the external, legalistic claims [of the LCMS]. The calls of the twelve apostles, with their restricted designations (*Bestimmungen*, appointments), did not belong here and the commissioning of the Seventy already delineates the question in our sense. For the New Testament Church the words of Matthew 28 apply: 'Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, etc.' That, and in this sense, is '*Stiftung*' (divinely ordained) in one direction. On the other hand, one had better pay attention to the narrative of the Scriptures, which is also divinely inspired. There is not enough said in Scripture to formulate a Missourian doctrine of the local congregation and the local ministry. Therefore also Acts 20:28 and all similar passages treat of the historical transference of the office, which points to the external circumstances as they have been determined through the course of the Gospel by the Holy Ghost. That – besides the commission – is the other side of the institution: the creation of the structure (*Gebilde*, institutions) of the Church of Christ through the Holy Ghost."

⁴⁴ Despite definitions to the contrary, this evangelical approach toward the life of the Church and of the Christian – and the appreciation for the gospel of Christ alone to create the best and most God-pleasing forms – is truly *the* hallmark of what is now called "the Wauwatosa Gospel." In short, the Wauwatosa Gospel was an attempt to properly distinguish between law and gospel in every aspect of church life and to root out all vestiges of legalism. That, they thought, could only be done by means of a proper historical-exegetical approach to Scripture (as well as to all faith-life), combined with a healthy dose of self-criticism.

The things God desires, for which he has created his Christians, and which for Christians are obvious without any further divine command, are by no means always done as they should be done unless Christians are instructed concerning them and reminded of them. ... [Christians] should realize that the impulse of their hearts to proclaim the gospel with their lips corresponds exactly to his will, that he has prepared them for this good work, and that this really is the light they should let shine. And when their sluggish flesh shrinks from the effort and sacrifice, they should hold [the Great Commission] up to their Old Adam as a command of God so that their flesh is struck down and permits the impulse of the Spirit in them to have free course.⁴⁵

August Pieper adds: “We would not need the command to [preach the gospel] if we were wholly spiritual. Only because we are not that as yet, but still have the shy, world-minded, lazy flesh clinging to us, has the Lord expressly given us the command.”⁴⁶

For this reason, too, Paul needed to remind the Corinthians that our God is a God of order (1 Co 14:33) and that he desires both ministry and worship to be carried out “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Co 14:40). For this reason, God instituted the public ministry because it serves that purpose. The confessors are making exactly the same point in Augustana XIV.

Is the public ministry of the gospel, in essence, any different than the ministry of the gospel common to all Christians? Not at all. Schaller writes that when God has raised up public ministers in his Church – even prophets and apostles – “their activity did not differ *essentially* from the preaching activity of *all* Christians.”⁴⁷ When a group of Christians calls someone to serve them as a public minister, they, as individuals, are not giving up their possession of the gospel ministry (*Predigtamt*). It always remains their possession. Luther wrote correctly and clearly:

I will show from the beginning with incontrovertible Scripture that the only true, genuine office of preaching [*Predigtamt*], like priesthood and sacrifice, is common to all Christians. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:6: “[He] has made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the Spirit.” These words St. Paul spoke to all Christians, that he might make ministers of the Spirit out of all of them. ... Peter speaks to all Christians: “That you may declare the might of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pe 2:9). ... We readily admit that not many of you are to preach at the same time, although all have the power to do so. When Paul said in Acts 14:12: “Barnabas be still!” was Barnabas therefore not supposed to have the power to preach? “But all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Co 14:40). By this the universality of the office of preaching is not abolished; indeed, it is strengthened thereby. For if all men did not possess the prerogative of preaching and only one had the right to speak, what need would there be to command and keep order? It is precisely because they all have the right and power to preach that it becomes necessary to keep order.⁴⁸

So what’s the only difference between public ministers and “average Joe-Christian”? The call. The call of the church to use the gospel on behalf of other Christians makes someone a public minister. Nothing else.⁴⁹ Our Confession states that without the call, “nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church.” As Koehler mentioned in his *History of the Wisconsin Synod*, this Scriptural teaching was brought to bear against religious fanatics “who set themselves up as teachers in opposition to the church and state authorities, claiming that the Spirit spoke through them, without the written Word, by direct revelation, which they called the ‘inner word.’”⁵⁰

In connection to how one enters the public ministry, one last point needs to be made: ordination is *not* an institution of God in the sense that the Roman Catholic Church and Romanizing Lutherans would suggest. Neither Scripture nor our article makes any mention of ordination as a necessary part of entering the public

⁴⁵ Schaller, op. cit., 77.

⁴⁶ August Pieper, “Legal Regulations?” 125-126.

⁴⁷ Schaller, op. cit., 89.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther, “The Misuse of the Mass,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 36, 149.

⁴⁹ It should also be remembered that spiritual gifts for ministry *qualify* a person for public ministry (1 Ti 3:1-13; Tit 1:6-9), but that these gifts don’t in and of themselves *make* a public minister. The call to perform public ministry is *ultimately* the defining factor. Notice that AC XIV makes no mention of gifts for ministry, only the Call.

⁵⁰ Koehler, *History*, 232.

ministry; in that respect ordination is simply an institution of men. Even within the Missouri Synod though there is the taint of Romanist thinking, namely, that the only legitimate public minister is the one who has been ordained into a “ministerial order” transmitted from the apostles to this present age.⁵¹ However, Professor Franz Pieper – the oft-quoted and much-revered LCMS theologian – nearly endorses Johann Höfling’s⁵² view when he states in his *Christian Dogmatics*:

One is inclined to judge Höfling less severely because his opponents (Münchmeyer, Löhe, Klifoth, etc.) taught a strongly Romanizing doctrine of the ministry, namely, that the office of the public ministry is not conferred by the call of the congregation as the original possessor of all spiritual power, but is a divine institution in the sense that it was transmitted immediately from the Apostles to their pupils, considered as a separate “ministerial order” or caste, and that this order perpetuates itself by means of the ordination. Some also spoke as if the means of grace exerted their full power and efficacy only when they were administered by men of this “order.” Against this caricature of the public ministry Höfling correctly argues that it makes the officiant a “means of grace” alongside Word and Sacrament: “The believers might see themselves with their spiritual needs referred not so much to Word and Sacrament as rather to the organ (the minister) divinely privileged to administer and distribute them. The full efficacy of the means of grace appears dependent on an external legal institution; the Holy Ghost now operates not so much through the means of grace as rather through the nomistic organs of their administration.”⁵³

Finally, why spill *so* much ink on this subject? And why does this continue to be such a hot topic in the Lutheran church today? The *real issue* all too often has been power! Who has the power and prestige in the visible church? The argument goes all the way back to the disciples of Jesus and before. The evangelists record this constant debate among those first followers: who is the greatest in the kingdom? Matthew tells us that Jesus finally took those men to task:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (διάκονος), and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served (διακονηθῆναι), but to serve (διακονῆσαι), and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:25-28).

When the disciples didn’t get it, he needed to remind them the evening before he died (Lk 22:24-30). Ministry has nothing to do with power; on the contrary: Ministry is service!

Sadly, though, this hunger for power has never been curbed in the church. Paul warned in his second letter to the Thessalonians that the “secret power of lawlessness” was working behind the scenes in his day, “but the one who now holds it back [the Roman empire] will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed [the institution of the Papacy]” (2 Th 2:7,8). To study the early Christian church’s history is to study the steady ascendancy and exercise of such lawlessness after Constantine. Anti-christ’s kingdom can be summed up in two words: spiritual tyranny. The laity is at the mercy of the priest, and ultimately the Pope, for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Rome, and others like them, are interested in keeping the laity “under their thumb.” They do that by elevating the clergy above the laity. The “priestly order” rises above the priesthood of all believers.

⁵¹ Others, like LCMS Professor David Scaer, go a step further. Scaer writes: “In coveting apostolic succession, we are desiring only half a loaf. ... If we stand with these men in a wondrous succession, we do not stand in their places. We stand only in the place of Christ who has designated us to be ministers of the Gospel. Because it is derived from the incarnation [of Christ], the ministry is not a divine abstraction but a flesh and blood reality” (op.cit., 18). Scaer is surprised that such a view is not wholeheartedly embraced: “What I find striking is the hesitancy or the embarrassment of deriving the ministry from our understanding of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, and the incarnation. Somehow when this approach is taken, such epithets as Romanist, Catholic, high church (you can supply the others) abound. It would seem that the connections between the ministry and the incarnation and God would be welcomed. But they are not” (ibid., 16). In point of fact, this view is incipient papistry (cp. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* [New York: Doubleday, 1994], paragraphs 1548-1553).

⁵² cf. footnote 27.

⁵³ Franz Pieper, op. cit., 447. Incidentally, John Brug comments that Walther himself was accused of being a Höflingite (“Current Debate,” 41-42).

Protestantism reacted, sometimes violently, to Rome's thirst for power. However, the Protestant solution simply goes to the other extreme in the clergy-laity dichotomy. The roles are simply reversed. In Protestantism there is an overemphasis on the priesthood of all believers and a downplaying of the called, public ministry. "Everyone is a minister!" the Protestant laity shouts. Many Protestant Christians buzz around like bees, chattering about the "ministries" they received when "God spoke to them," even though they are without a legitimate call. Why the rush to become "ministers"? Ultimately, history has proven that such people often are interested in power and status! Those who are interested in power aren't interested in being "ministers" for the purpose of serving others in slavish love as Jesus served us; otherwise they would wait for the call of the Church. Spiritual tyranny of another kind often runs rampant.

How different, again, is Jesus: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:25-28).

Professor Daniel Deutschlander writes that in this age of history only the Lutheran church has found the proper balance between the public ministry of the gospel and the priesthood of all believers, and this only when the biblical definition of ministry is kept in mind: service. He writes:

But lest we miss the narrow Lutheran middle road between two false extremes, the Scriptures stress repeatedly that this office [the public ministry] has not been established for the glory of its occupants but for the glory of the Savior and for the benefit of the church. The lives of the apostles and prophets make clear the surpassing greatness of the work and its object, the church, as compared with the occupants of the office. ... Jesus called the apostles to the high calling of lowliness, to the great ambition of servanthood, and promises those who bear this gospel message that they will be persecuted for it (Mt 10:16-25). St. Paul says of himself and his co-workers that Christ has given them entirely for the benefit of the church and for the service of the church (1 Co 4:9-13; 2 Co 12:15). St. Peter exhorts all of his fellow pastors to see to it that their ambition is exercised in an eagerness to serve, not to lord it over the flock of Christ (1 Pe 5:1-4).⁵⁴

In other words, the ministry of the gospel has nothing to do with power and glory. Its ultimate purpose is self-sacrificing love and service. Its model is our Savior Jesus.

To summarize then, let us maintain our evangelical doctrine and practice on the basis of these three Scriptural truths:

1) Ministry means service. It means to serve and not to be served. Ministry has nothing to do with power or prestige; it has to do with sacrifice (Mt 20:28).

2) The ministry of the gospel (*Predigtamt*) is a task given to every Christian that we might "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pe 2:9). This proclamation of the gospel is an evangelical institution of God.

3) The public ministry of the gospel is carried out by Christians regularly called into public (representative) offices (positions) to preach, teach, and administer the gospel. Such offices would include the office of congregational pastor, school teacher and professor, missionary, Sunday school teacher, elder, evangelist, communion assistant, etc. Both the public ministry of the gospel in general and these separate ministerial offices or forms are evangelical institutions or arrangements of God, brought into being by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. They allow Christians to serve one another publicly with their God-given gifts, while helping to maintain peace and good order within the Church (1 Co 14:40). We reject the notion that the present-day office of congregational pastor is the only public office instituted by God to the exclusion of other offices. Nor is the present-day office of congregational pastor the successor of some special "ministerial order" passed down from the original apostles of Christ. Every public minister today – indeed, every Christian today! – is the inheritor of apostolic *teaching*, not the apostolic *office* (position) as such.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Daniel Deutschlander, *The Theology of the Call and Ministry* (Watertown, Wisconsin: Northwestern College Press, 1993), 9-10.

⁵⁵ Schaller, op. cit., 88. The apostolic office had special requirements (Ac 1:21,22) and gifts (2 Co 12:12).



II. What Of Men?

As important as it is to consider the question, “What of God in worship and ministry?” it is equally important to ask, “What of men in worship and ministry?” In the history of the Christian church, rarely have the battles truly been about the institution of God, the gospel. Finally, the gospel is what it is, and concerning it there can be little argument. Instead the real battles have tended to be over the institutions of men; Christians trying to impose “their way of doing things” upon other Christians, even though these human institutions are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. We call them adiaphora.

Church Usages (AC XV): With regard to church usages that have been established by men, it is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church, among them being certain holy days, festivals, and the like. Yet we accompany these observances with instruction so that consciences may not be burdened by the notion that such things are necessary for salvation. Moreover it is taught that all ordinances and traditions instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and the teaching about faith in Christ. Accordingly monastic vows and other traditions concerning distinctions of food, days, etc., by which it is intended to earn grace and make satisfaction for sin, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.⁵⁶

There are two extreme approaches to the issue of adiaphora, both of which have reared their ugly heads from the days of Corinth to our present day. Paul categorizes them as the “strong” and “weak” positions. Both approaches have led to turmoil, persecution, and even death.

The “strong” in Corinth understood that eating food sacrificed to idols was neither here nor there, neither commanded nor forbidden by God in the New Testament era. They knew that they had Christian freedom to either eat or not eat. Yet Paul still encouraged the “strong” to refrain from such eating out of love for the “weak,” who struggled with such eating. He writes: “If what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall” (1 Co 8:13). But instead of displaying such a self-sacrificing attitude of love, the “strong” in Corinth apparently asserted their Christian liberty with the cry, “Everything is permissible,” to which Paul answered, “But not everything is beneficial ... not everything is constructive” (1 Co 10:23).

The “weak,” on the other hand, were no less guilty of a faulty approach in regard to adiaphora. They failed to understand the distinction between those things instituted by God and those things instituted by men. Furthermore, they went on to burden the consciences of others by demanding that these human institutions and regulations be slavishly followed, sometimes even suggesting that they were necessary for salvation.⁵⁷ Concerning the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul encouraged the “weak” Corinthians not to burden themselves or others with their erring consciences. While Paul conceded that “everything is permissible,” he also reminded these people that they should “not be mastered by anything” (1 Co 6:12). Instead, he wrote, “Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience. ... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Co 10:25,31).

Today many, many instances of adiaphora arise in the areas of worship and ministry. In fact, nowhere else do matters of adiaphora seem to surface more frequently. Unlike the Old Testament days when God spelled out how the worship and ministry of the tabernacle and temple were to take place, in the New Testament era he has left the forms of worship and ministry entirely up to human discretion, giving us freedom in the forms we choose. Yet, as we’ll see, with freedom comes also responsibility.

This truth cannot be stressed enough: New Testament forms of worship and ministry are adiaphora, things freely instituted by men.⁵⁸ And since they are adiaphora, the danger forever exists that Christians will

⁵⁶ Tappert, op. cit., 36-37.

⁵⁷ An example of this is seen in the Galatian Judiazers’ insistence on circumcision.

⁵⁸ Though it could also rightly be said that *every* form in the life of Christians is divinely instituted, insofar as those forms proceed from faith, since they are “fruit of the Spirit” (Ga 5:22,25) and “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Php 2:13). In other words, the Christian is freely led by the Holy Spirit through the gospel even in his establishment and

take either a “strong” or “weak” approach toward them. As leaders in the church, we must be especially vigilant in upholding and defending Christian liberty. Sadly, however, we can often be the greatest offenders of conscience-binding in these matters! We of all Christians must have an evangelically balanced approach toward every issue of adiaphora in worship and ministry.

But doing that is more difficult than it first sounds. In fact, it’s nearly impossible. Why? St. Paul points out the difficulty in his first letter to the Corinthians. He writes: “I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved” (1 Co 10:33). Luther phrased that near-impossible balance this way: “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁵⁹ Simply stated, if we’re dealing with adiaphora *correctly*, the strong possibility exists that we will be forced to “talk out of both sides of our mouth,” trying to please everybody in every way.⁶⁰ If we’re dealing with adiaphora *correctly*, charges of unfairness and favoritism will most certainly abound. How much easier it would be to simply make up rules, to bind consciences, and to handle every situation and person exactly the same way! Being legalistic is always easier than being truly evangelical. The results of legalism, however, are disastrous.

We must be evangelical. That’s Lutheran! With guidance from the Holy Spirit through the gospel, we must make prudent decisions concerning the forms of ministry and worship that we employ in service to the gospel and the people we serve. We *must not* make adiaphora a matter of conscience or law. Instead, in every given situation, we need to repeatedly ask ourselves as individual Christians, as congregations, and as a synod: “What forms of worship and ministry *best* proclaim the rich message of the gospel to the people we are serving?” That is our primary and ultimate goal: proclaiming the gospel as best and as richly as we can. Nothing more; nothing less.

Believe it or not, though, different people may come to different conclusions when they ask and answer that question! Such disagreement in matters of adiaphora, we must agree, is entirely permissible and even to be expected. There simply may not be complete uniformity in practice concerning adiaphora, even among those who completely agree in doctrine and practice. After all, these matters are free, and we rejoice in the variety of gifts and talents and ideas that God gives to his Church. We must also remember that situations vary from congregation to congregation, person to person. The best form of gospel proclamation in one congregation may bring confusion and unrest in another.

That said, we must also be careful that our forms of worship and our methods of ministry do not in any way undermine the truths of the gospel. We must ask ourselves: do our forms proclaim the gospel, or do people just like them because they’re different and entertaining or, for that matter, because they are traditional and sentimental? Too often we are the unsuspecting victims (and perpetrators!) of diminishing the truths of the gospel with our forms! For instance, we might insist so much on a certain form of worship to help rectify a “spiritual downturn” among our people that its use overshadows the *content* of worship, the gospel itself. Or we might stumble into thinking that a certain method or “philosophy” of ministry will bring desired success rather than realizing that only the gospel brings true success. The gospel is the only legitimate remedy to spiritual malaise. We can’t take it for granted, something that we *say* we’d never do, yet something that we are forever in danger of doing when we’re trapped in the pitfall of trusting forms and abusing liberty! Let us recommit ourselves to the foolish gospel, which alone works and strengthens faith. Trust the Holy Spirit, not human forms. That’s Lutheran!

Historically, no one since the time of the Apostles has dealt more evangelically with matters of adiaphora than Martin Luther. No one has dealt more legalistically than Rome and the Protestants. Let us take

use of adiaphora. As a result, every adiaphoron can be used or dismissed freely by Christians (1 Co 9:19-23) as they are led by the Spirit through the gospel to do so. The object of all these free forms is to “serve one another in love” (Ga 5:13). Of course, the difficulty comes in when the sinful flesh exerts its pressure to make these forms a matter of conscience, robbing Christian freedom (Ga 5:1).

⁵⁹ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 31, 344.

⁶⁰ For instance, Paul’s seemingly divergent actions when it came to the circumcision of Timothy (Ac 16:3) versus the non-circumcision of Titus (Ga 2:3) are irreconcilable unless you understand what it means to have a truly evangelical approach toward adiaphora.

Luther as our model. We all know that Luther railed against the man-made laws of Rome. He railed against the idea that the worship forms of Rome were necessary for salvation, as Rome insisted they were. He railed against the idea that the forms of ministry within the Roman church – especially the papal hierarchy – were necessary for salvation, as Rome insisted they were. Our Confession clearly states along with Luther: “It is taught among us that all ordinances and traditions instituted by men for the purpose of propitiating God and earning grace are contrary to the Gospel and the teaching about faith in Christ.” Rome had long fallen into legalistic formalism, a disease that continues to this very day. The gospel is no longer at the center of their worship and ministry. The law is. The forms of worship and ministry are the all-consuming thing to good Catholics. The institutions of men have long since trumped the institution of God.

And yet what did Luther do with Catholic forms at the time of the Reformation? Did he throw them all out? Did he smash the altars and the organs and the stained glass windows? Did he innovate totally new worship forms? Did he obliterate the distinction between the public ministry and the laity? Did he get rid of all things “Catholic?” Hardly. He left the church-smashing to the radical reformers – or the *Schwärmer* (enthusiasts), as Luther called them – men like Muenzer, Karlstadt, and Zwingli. Later on rationalist reformers like those led by John Calvin did the same thing. These reformers threw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. They purged their churches of anything that remotely smacked of Romanism, even when that meant denying the truths of the gospel and overthrowing God’s institution.⁶¹ And where have the churches of their spiritual descent landed? On the whole, they deny the power of the gospel just as Rome does. Their made-man, legalistic forms take precedence over the gospel. They bind consciences with their rules and laws. Their institutions of men trump the institution of God, and most Protestants give Rome a run for their money in the race to be most legalistic.

Luther and his followers have instead historically traveled the narrow, Lutheran – and truly evangelical – middle road. Our Confession states: “It is taught among us that those usages are to be observed which may be observed without sin and which contribute to peace and good order in the church, among them being certain holy days, festivals, and the like.” In other words, Luther held onto many things “Catholic” as long as it was remembered that these forms were to be used in Christian freedom and as long as they contributed to peace and good order.

To (Luther), both papists and Enthusiasts were enemies of Christian liberty. Both meant to replace faith with human rites. The pope had bound the conscience of men to certain works. ... By their mere performance, these works were supposed to warrant the mercy of God. ... Some of these rites were wrong in themselves and had to be swept away ... Others might be retained or removed, according to the verdict of the individual conscience. But even this freedom the pope was unwilling to grant.

The Enthusiasts, on the other hand, made a law of that evangelical freedom which Luther proclaimed. Whatever the pope had commanded for salvation, they meant to prohibit. They failed to see that man is justified neither by the performance nor by the neglect of certain rites. They tyrannized the conscience of men as much as the pope and were just as slow to grant freedom in the use of liturgical forms.⁶²

Do you see the parallels in our own church body today? More and more we have two sides in our synod contending for their points of view concerning worship and ministry forms. You can label them anyway you want, but both sides to this issue must remember: we’re dealing with adiaphora! All forms are free – whether they follow traditional usages or initiate new ones. Simply put, there is too much conscience-binding going on among us in matters of adiaphora. Why argue, for instance, about whether a pastor should wear a white alb or a black Geneva or no robe at all? These matters are free! If he has a good reason for it, if the gospel is being truly proclaimed, and if all things are being done in a fitting and orderly way, let it be! We could all learn something from Luther, who, on the one hand, was determined not to undermine Christian liberty, yet, on the other hand,

⁶¹ For example, they denied the Real Presence in Holy Communion and the regenerating power of Holy Baptism. These ideas were deemed far too Catholic for acceptance, and Luther was accused of succumbing to Rome when he vigorously upheld these truths of the gospel.

⁶² Vilmos Vajta, *Luther on Worship*, 173.

was interested that peace and good order be maintained through the forms of worship and ministry. He made no rules as long as the gospel was being proclaimed and good order was being maintained.

Practically speaking, though, in the area of adiaphora Luther himself had a conservative nature. And why was that? Certainly not because of laziness or fear or “crypto-Catholicism,” as some would then and later suggest.⁶³ No, the source of Luther’s conservative reforms was ultimately his faith in the gospel. Luther had a deep appreciation for the gospel’s power to do the saving work of God. He also believed that in time the Holy Spirit through the gospel would lead Christians to produce the very best forms for worship and ministry. “Why insist upon man-made forms?” Luther might have said. “It’s the gospel that saves, and the gospel will produce its own best forms in time!” Luther didn’t get too hung up on forms.

In the introduction to his *Deutsche Messe* (1526) – a German order of worship that Luther was proposing for use in Lutheran congregations – Luther makes it exceedingly clear that upholding Christian liberty was of prime importance to him in this endeavor. “In the first place, I would kindly and for God’s sake request all those who see this order of service or desire to follow it: Do not make it a rigid law to bind or entangle anyone’s conscience, but use it in Christian liberty as long, when, where, and how you find it to be practical and useful.”⁶⁴

However, Luther, like Paul, was not willing to grant Christian liberty absolute “carte blanche” in matters of adiaphora. Instead he wanted all Christians to remember what the real goal of Christian liberty is, since some were abusing that liberty by the introduction of all kinds of novel worship forms.

Some have the best intentions [in producing new forms of worship], but others have no more than an itch to produce something novel so that they might shine before men as leading lights, rather than being ordinary teachers – as is always the case with Christian liberty: very few use it for the glory of God and the good of the neighbor; most of it for their own advantage and pleasure. But while the exercise of this freedom is up to everyone’s conscience and must not be cramped or forbidden, nevertheless, we must make sure that freedom shall be and remain a servant of love and of our fellow-man .⁶⁵

That said, Luther also states that uniformity in the use of forms is beneficial and something that we should strive for, even if that means voluntarily surrendering some of our Christian liberty.

Where the people are perplexed and offended by these differences in liturgical usage, however, we are certainly bound to forego our freedom and seek, if possible, to better rather than to offend them by what we do or leave undone. Seeing then that this external order, while it cannot affect the conscience before God, may yet serve the neighbor, we should seek to be of one mind in Christian love ... As far as possible we should observe the same rites and ceremonies .⁶⁶

Luther understood well the paradox that in matters of adiaphora he was subject to none and slave to all. Such understanding was a direct result of his faith in the gospel to work salvation. Professor Joh. Ph. Koehler comments on Luther’s evangelical approach to adiaphora:

In Luther’s life we may behold what a great thing in life faith is. ... There is no pretense, no pose about him, but the spontaneous, unhampered bubbling of a spirit whose fountain-head is faith and in this faith knows himself to be lord of all things and subject to none. For that reason Luther had a much keener

⁶³ This was a common charge made by the later Lutheran Pietists against Luther, beginning with Jakob Spener’s *Pia Desideria* (1675). The Pietists suggested that Luther had not gone “far enough” in his reforms of the Lutheran church. According to the Pietists, Luther was the champion of justification but hadn’t taught enough about sanctification. The Pietists thought it their calling to take the next step in teaching sanctification. Pietism, however, sought to “improve matters by outward and therefore legalistic means. ... That the term “pietism” was coined by [orthodox] Lutherans may be accounted for by their greater alertness to the truth that only the Means of Grace can create spiritual life and build the church, and that sanctification must remain unalloyed with any kind of legalism and not be made a matter of program, since it is not our doing but rather the gift of the Spirit” (Koehler, *History*, 15). Pietism continues to have a destructive influence among Lutherans today, even within the WELS, as we all face the ever-present temptation to rely on methods rather than the power of the means of grace.

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, “The German Mass and Order of Service,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 53, 61.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

appreciation of true progress in the life of mankind ... and Luther gave proof of this understanding when he purified but conserved the order of common worship.⁶⁷

Again some may ask: why *purify* and *conserve* the traditional forms of worship rather than starting fresh as the radical reformers did? Our Confession gives us the answer: because the traditional forms of worship in the Christian church “contribute to peace and good order in the church.” In addition, the Apology states that celebrating the church year and following a regular liturgical form is also educational. Traditional liturgical forms teach and re-teach the truths of Scripture and salvation week after week, year after year. Most importantly, they keep the Means of Grace squarely in the center of worship.⁶⁸ In other words, Luther recognized that there was much benefit to good, liturgical worship. In fact, later on our Confession even boasts that these forms of worship were “observed among us with greater devotion and more earnestness than among our opponents.”⁶⁹

Were those worship forms perfect? No forms are this side of heaven. Luther recognized that. “But it wasn’t his way to try to restore, for instance like the Calvinists, the forms and conditions of the Apostolic age. He left things as they were excepting that he removed errors that had become attached to them.”⁷⁰

Such was also his attitude when it came to the traditional forms of ministry. Again Luther was conservative in his approach. When, for instance, Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets disturbed the Wittenbergers in 1521 by blurring the distinction between the public ministry and the priesthood of all believers, Luther took action. At the time he was hidden away in the Wartburg, but when these enthusiasts began to officiate without liturgical vestments and to encourage the laity to help themselves to the bread and wine directly from the altar,⁷¹ Luther hurried to Wittenberg. He preached a series of eight sermons emphasizing that the gospel alone must accomplish needed reforms. “I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion ... I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing ... the Word did everything ... When we spread the Word alone and let it alone do the work, that distresses [the devil]. For it is almighty and takes captive the hearts, and when the hearts are captured the work will fall of itself.”⁷²

As for Karlstadt’s practice at Holy Communion, “while granting that it was not wrong to give the bread and wine into the hands of the laity, (Luther) urged moderation and restraint.”⁷³ As we know, Luther was the champion of the priesthood of all believers, yet he also recognized the necessity of peace and good order in public ministry forms and church polity. This led Luther and his followers to confess in the Apology that it was their “*deep desire* [emphasis added] to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority.”⁷⁴

To summarize: it was because of Luther’s conservative nature that the Lutheran church continued to use worship and ministry forms that outwardly seemed quite Catholic, although inwardly they were imbued with an evangelical spirit. Historically, Lutheran forms of worship have been traditional and liturgical, while Lutheran forms of ministry have tended to be hierarchical. In both instances, the desired result was maintenance of Christian liberty alongside peace and good order to promote and further the proclamation of the gospel. That history cannot be denied or argued.

However, neither can that history be used in a legalistic manner, as when someone might say, for instance, “We should do worship or ministry this way, because Luther did it this way.” Luther would be appalled at his name being used in such a statement concerning adiaphora! While Luther’s forms were certainly conservative and gospel-oriented – and, yes, even good – we must be careful not to make Luther into a “new

⁶⁷ Koehler, *History*, 6-7

⁶⁸ Tappert, op. cit., 218, 220, 222, 249.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁷⁰ Koehler, *History*, 82.

⁷¹ Ernest Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 538.

⁷² Martin Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 51, 77-78. Hereafter referred to as “Eight Sermons.”

⁷³ Schwiebert, op. cit., 542. Cf. Martin Luther, “Eight Sermons,” 89-91.

⁷⁴ Tappert, op. cit., 214.

law” or to use his name to infringe on someone else’s Christian liberty. Remember: such an infringement was Luther’s foremost concern!

However, that’s exactly what many of the so-called Old (conservative) Lutherans did when they first arrived in America. They legalistically imposed the traditional Lutheran forms of the Old Country upon New World Christians. Koehler reports:

When, for instance, outward forms were to be instituted and were urged as specifically Lutheran, the non-clerical Christians [i.e., the laity] were handicapped because of lack of training along these lines. Their intuitive feeling and rightful aversion, to which they might give voice, did not count, of course, when *Vater Luther* or some other church father was cited as sponsor, and it took a rare amount of Christian courage in those days to insist on one’s Christian liberty over against the doctors of the doctrine.⁷⁵

On the other hand, Luther would say, people shouldn’t use their Christian liberty “trump card” to dismiss traditional forms of worship and ministry simply because they’re itching to have something new and exciting. Sadly, that has often been the approach taken to combat traditionalism, as Koehler states: “Needless to say, those who appealed to Christian liberty, too, were inhibited by the current intellectualism of the age and thus quite often in the same bondage of legalism that militated against the true conception of the freedom of the Gospel.”⁷⁶ When it comes right down to it, both traditionalism and faddism in worship and ministry forms tend to be two sides of the same coin. Both are often the result of intellectual, even spiritual, slothfulness. Rather than giving God our best, we give him the easiest, the “most comfortable,” and too often the most mundane.

Instead let us strive to give our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier the very best in all we do! That’s Lutheran! To do that we must steer clear of the two false and extreme approaches to Christian liberty, both of which result in slothful legalism. We must strike an evangelically balanced approach to adiaphora as Luther did by remembering and putting into practice these seven scriptural truths:

- 1) All forms instituted by men are, in themselves, free to be used or left unused in Christian liberty (1 Co 6:12; 9:19; 10:23).
- 2) The goal of Christian liberty is unhindered love and service to God and our fellow Christian (Ga 5:13; 1 Co 9:19; 10:24), a love that is often best expressed by voluntarily surrendering our Christian liberty for the sake of the gospel (1 Co 9:19-23).
- 3) All beneficial forms instituted by men will promote peace and good order (1 Co 14:33,40).
- 4) The best forms are those forms that put the focus squarely on the Means of Grace, the gospel (1 Co 9:23).
- 5) The gospel itself produces the best forms among men (Jn 15:5; Ga 5:22,23; Php 2:13).
- 6) If at all possible, uniformity in adiaphora should be sought (1 Co 1:10; 11:16).
- 7) Everything should be done to the glory of God (1 Co 10:31).

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III. Corinth Yesterday And Today

As I have already alluded to in the body of this essay, many of the same devilish attitudes that were found in the Corinthian congregation of the first century can be found today within the Christian church, within the Wisconsin Synod, and, yes, even within our own hearts. That should come as no surprise. We are all sinners. Christians have always been tempted to trust human institutions to work change in the hearts of unbelievers and Christians alike instead of relying on God’s institution, the gospel of forgiveness and eternal salvation. The gospel seems so powerless and so foolish! It doesn’t always produce the results we want, and it almost never produces those results as quickly as we want. And so we strike upon other ideas – legalistic ones –

⁷⁵ Koehler, *History*, 83.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

pushing, prodding, and coercing as the law does, rather than wooing, winning, and inviting as the gospel does. It would be naïve to suggest that we have never had those “bright ideas” ourselves, because we all have. We’ve all broken the First Commandment in our lives as Christian leaders, trusting ourselves, our methods, and our forms instead of trusting the Holy Spirit to work faith and good works discreetly through the gospel in his own good time.

Yet we continue to trust human institutions! In my opinion, one of the biggest mistakes we can make is to look at the way another church or congregation “does it” – particularly a church that is exhibiting a lot of numerical growth – and then say, “We’re going to do worship and ministry their way, because their way works!” How naïve! Now, I’m not saying that we can’t learn things about gospel ministry from other churches, even those outside our fellowship. We can. But before we jump headlong into “doing things their way” – using their humanly devised forms of worship and ministry – we need to ask ourselves some very fundamental questions: “Why is their way of doing things so ‘successful’? Is their ‘success’ based on legalistic, human institutions, or is it a result of God’s evangelical institution, the gospel? Has this church hit upon a form of preaching the gospel that is better and richer than the form my church is currently using? Or is their growth, at least in part, a result of incipient legalism?” The answer is often the latter.

We need to ask the question: What of God and what of men? Too often we don’t.

[Instead, we adopt spiritually barren, human forms] thoughtlessly, mechanically, without really thinking anything about it. In every instance, the gospel is not the great mainspring, which is in itself a great, glorious treasure and also ripens beautiful fruits, not only insofar as the result is great and beautiful, but also the manner in which it is obtained. These other methods are not only in themselves of a legalistic nature according to their derivation, but they also will bring along in their train [legalistic habits] ... into the whole life of the church, and then at the end this produces results that are worthless, mechanical, superficial, external, artificial, as these attributes apply in each individual case.⁷⁷

Notice: One may get “results” from using legalistic forms – big numbers! – but have you fulfilled our Savior’s Great Commission to “preach the *gospel* to all creation” (Mk 16:15)? Hardly. Permit me several examples to illustrate my point.

I am convinced that I could get a whole lot more people to join my congregation if numerical growth for its own sake was *really* the goal. All I’d need to do is be more legalistic than I already tend to be by nature. All I’d need to do is be more like my Baptist friends down the street! All I’d need to do is emulate the “gospel preaching” that I hear resounding in those cauldrons of legalism and twist the sacraments of God’s free forgiveness into something that the Christian offers to God! Or I could be more like my Roman Catholic friends downtown and tell people that unless they are a member of the *Lutheran* church, they are going to hell! That unless they contribute “such and such” to their salvation, they are in danger of eternal flames! Simply preach “sanctification” to the exclusion of justification, even though that’s a theological non sequitur. But preaching “sanctification” gets results, they argue! Yes, legalism does produce outward results.

In addition, I am convinced that I could get a whole lot more people into worship and Bible study in my congregation if that in itself was *really* the goal. All I’d need to do is be more legalistic than I already tend to be by nature. I could get my congregational members to place a heavier envelope in the offering plate every Sunday if that was *really* the goal. All I’d need to do is be more legalistic. Yes, I could have a congregation of thousands in time, I could have my own TV network, I could have my name on bookshelves and marquees throughout the world if that was *really* the goal. All I’d need to do is be more legalistic.

Simply put, if you want *church* members, and if you want those church members to get things done – to “act like Christians” – well then my advice to you is this: adopt the forms of churches that seem to be “successful” without scrutinizing the reason for their “success.” Or better yet: adopt their forms without scrutiny with the intention of simply “adding the gospel” later on. You’ll probably be “successful,” too. But in the end, you’ll probably have to remove the word “evangelical” from your name because you will have ceased to be truly evangelical. History has proven that legalism shrewdly accompanies the forms it spawns, no matter how

⁷⁷ Koehler, “Legalism,” 278.

conscientiously we try to “inject” the gospel into those forms. To even attempt it is like trying to put “new wine into old wineskins.” Jesus himself promised that it wouldn’t work. In fact, it is destined to fail miserably. “Both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined” (Mk 2:22). But on the “upside,” such legalism is “successful” in this world ruled by the *opinio legis*. It brings “results.”

Yes, legalism makes *church* members. It also makes people do things that by nature they wouldn’t normally do. But legalism does something else: It destroys Christian faith. It robs people of Christ and the complete freedom he has won for them. Yes, it nullifies the gospel, the institution of God.

We could have such “success” in the Wisconsin Synod if that was *really* our goal, if that was *really* the task that our Savior gave his Church. But our goal is *not* to make simple *church* members by cramming human institutions down people’s throats or by deceiving people into thinking that we’re something we’re not. Sadly we all forget that over and over again! Our goal and privilege is to assist the Holy Spirit in making *Church* members, true disciples, that is, members of the one holy Christian and apostolic Church.

We too want growth—real growth in faith and love. But how is that goal achieved? How is that task accomplished? Just one way! “Preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk 16:15), “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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:19,20). God’s institution, the gospel, is our only hope, our only stay, our only salvation, and God’s only Means of Grace. And so what kind of human institutions – forms of worship and ministry – are we going to want to have and use? Only those that originate in the gospel, are grounded in the gospel, and proclaim the gospel of God’s free forgiveness and the eternal life won for us through our Savior’s holy, precious blood and innocent sufferings and death. Only God’s institution has the power to save people now and in eternity. Human inventions simply won’t do it.

The Corinthians forgot that. We forget that. We need to ask the question: “What of God, and what of men?”

That’s why Paul wrote what he did in his first letter to the Corinthians. That’s also why Paul needed to write elsewhere: “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” (Ro 1:16) because sometimes we act like we are; we act as if we don’t really trust the gospel to do its saving work. Yes, Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians and us that our salvation – and that our work of proclaiming salvation – does not rest on the wisdom of Greeks or the miraculous signs of Jews, glorious and successful as they may appear. Nor does it rest on the slick forms and methods that other modern churches may employ, even though they may produce “results.” Instead, our salvation and the true success of our work rely solely on one thing and one thing only: God’s institution, the gospel.

We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. ... It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Co 1:23-25,30,31).

We are thankful for the growth the Holy Spirit produces whether it comes in a trickle or in a flood. Let us continue to rely on his power alone.

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