

Of Church and Ministry and the LCMS

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The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod's sense of Church and Ministry was born out of the tumultuous relationship between its first "bishop" and subsequent revolt against clericalism. Its young but respected leader, C. F. W. Walther, would define its ecclesiology mindful of the events that served to propel him into the leadership of the Saxon migration of which, months earlier, he was but a participant. Subsequent debates with the likes of Grabau and Loehe would reinforce the Scriptural and Confessional principles that formed and shaped his understanding of *Church and Ministry*¹ which stands as the doctrinal position of the Synod since 1851.

In 1838, under the "charismatic leadership"² of Pastor Martin Stephan, seven hundred, primarily Saxon emigrants, sailed to America to escape the Prussian Union – a forced commingling of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches. Within the company were pastors and theological candidates, along with professional men, skilled and unskilled laborers and their families. Bound by their consciences and commitment to the Lutheran Confessions, they sailed to America, first arriving in New Orleans. While Stephan and some of the company traveled to and remained in St. Louis, most of the party settled into land that was purchased in Perry County, Missouri. As they traveled by sea, the Saxons (whom some refer to as "Stephanites") selected Stephan to serve as "Bishop," granting him both temporal and spiritual power. The Saxons immediately realized their mistake as reports of their Bishop's womanizing ways and wanton spending required action to be taken. Along with a respected layman, Walther was tasked to confront Stephan with his sin. On May 20, 1839, Stephan was excommunicated and removed from office for his immorality, misuse of funds, and false doctrine. He was taken across the Mississippi River and unceremoniously "dumped" into Illinois.

Not surprisingly, chaos enveloped the colony. The treasury was almost empty, and the winter brought rough days for the colonists. Deeper than this, however, was the theological question: "Are we a church?" Pastors doubted the validity of their calls. Factions began to be formed between the pastors who wanted to maintain a hierarchical

¹ The original title was *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* (translated: *Voice of our Church on the Question Concerning the Church and the Ministry*) and later shortened to *Kirche und Amt*, or its English translation: *Church and Ministry*.

² This description comes from Todd Peperkorn's Thesis paper entitled, *The Use of C. F. W. Walther's "Kirche und Amt" in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to 1947*, p. 24.

form of government and a well-educated anti-clerical faction who were demanding a voice in the affairs of the community. The anti-clerical faction based their argument on Luther's doctrine of the sovereignty of the congregation, and found written form in a *Protestationschrift*, prepared by Carl Eduard Vehse.³

Walther would eventually have to address the situation, but the stress of the situation took its toll, physically; he would spend several months in prayer and study of Luther and the church fathers as he recuperated. During this time Vehse returned to Germany and his argument was taken up by a lawyer, Adolf Marbach. Walther engaged Marbach in a debate in 1841, positing a series of statements which have since become known as the "Altenburg Theses." Walther had considered some of what Vehse had originally demanded, but he also approached the matter in a very specific manner – a *Waltherian* manner of argument based on the testimony of the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, and the church fathers.

In *Kirche und Amt* [Walther's] procedure is to put down a thesis and then the evidence which produces it in order of magnitude: Scripture, Confessions, and then teachers of the church. Only Scripture is adduced as giving proof. After that come the witnesses of Confessions and teachers.⁴

Walther's argument at Altenburg was to encourage the Saxon immigrants not to give into unfounded fears regarding their being a church. He consoled their hearts, convincing them that they were Christians despite any error in their midst; that the Church was to be found in their company; that they were a part of the *Una Sanctum Ecclesia* (Universal Church); and that as possessors of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, they had the power and authority to call pastors to proclaim the Gospel and administer the Sacraments.

Meanwhile, Johannes Andreas August Grabau, pastor in Erfurt, also ran afoul of the German officials with regards to the Prussian Union; he was thrown into prison for two years for his opposition to the Union Agenda. He was released when he petitioned for permission to emigrate, also to America. Along with his congregation and a group of Silesians, Grabau sailed to America; the Prussians settling in Buffalo, New York while the rest went on to Wisconsin. Controversy also stirred within their ranks when the Wisconsin contingent used a schoolteacher to preach and administer the sacraments in their midst, when no pastor could be found. Grabau vehemently disapproved. He sent a copy of his *Hirtenbrief* to Walther

³ Ibid., p. 25.

⁴ Norman Nagel, "The Doctrine of the Office of the Holy Ministry in the Confessions and in Walther's *Kirche und Amt*," *Concordia Journal* 15 (1989) 423-46.

and G. H. Loeber. The Altenburg Debate and subsequent fallout occupied their attention; when they replied two years later, disagreeing with Grabau, the two groups began a decades-long, heated exchange. At the same time, relations with the Missouri Saxons and Pastor Wilhelm Loehe of Bavaria, who had sent many pastors to America, likewise soured. Loehe and Grabau maintained a high-church, or hierarchical interpretation of the Lutheran Confessions where Walther and the Missouri pastors did not. Of note, the primary differences were:

- Grabau and Loehe maintained that the Christian Church is a *visible* Church of people gathered about the Word and Sacraments. Walther and the Missouri pastors maintained that the Christian Church in its true sense is *invisible* and while scattered physically it was united spiritually.
- Grabau taught that communion with the invisible Church is not sufficient to obtain salvation. Walther contended that whoever makes salvation dependent upon communion with any visible church overthrows the article of justification of a poor sinner before God by faith alone.
- Grabau and Loehe espoused an understanding of Ordination as a divine institution essential to the validity of the (pastoral) ministry. Walther saw ordination as an apostolic-ecclesiastical created rite which served primarily as a public confirmation of the call extended by the congregation.
- Grabau believed that the efficacy of the sacraments depended on the validity of the (pastoral) ministry. Walther saw that the administration of the sacraments depended solely on the Word of God.
- Grabau and Loehe saw that the Office of the Keys was entirely invested in the pastoral ministry and not the congregation. Walther taught and maintained that the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven were given to the entire Christian Church by the priesthood of all believers; which Keys were given to the called pastor to exercise on behalf of the congregation.
- Grabau and Loehe also maintained that the Office of the Ministry was given by God to the whole Christian Church as a separate rank or class within the Church. Walther, again, hearkened to Luther's priesthood of all believers, demonstrating that in the New Testament all Christians were called priests, and that while the pastoral ministry was a distinct office that was divinely instituted, pastors were not of a different rank from their fellow Christians.

Grabau, primarily, held a high view of the office of the ordained ministry, which he based on Augsburg Confession Article XIV and on the German church orders or

Kircheordnungen.⁵ Walther and the Missouri/Saxon pastors countered that it was the Word of God that was the active force in the ministry and that the pastoral ministry was *conferred* upon the man rather than the individual being admitted into the ministry. They argued “that the place of the congregation as the people of God and the spiritual priesthood would be undermined if the Office was held up as Grabau had done.⁶ No less than Theodore Tappert argues that the doctrine of the ministry was the central issue of mid-nineteenth century Lutheran confessionalism.⁷

Peperkorn describes the thrust of Walther’s ecclesiology in the formation of what would become The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

In 1847, the Missouri Synod chose to set up its constitution along congregationalist lines, much to the chagrin of both Loehe and Grabau. Grabau charged the Synod with being separatist, and Loehe argues that they had ‘...a strong admixture of democratic, independent, and congregational principles.’ The ‘fundamental element’ . . . to the structure of the Missouri Synod was that it was a union of both clergy and laity, unlike the older, Eastern Lutheran tradition of a clergy ministerium. At the same time, however, the synodical president was invested with a great deal of authority. This element, with C. F. W. Walther at the helm for most of the remainder of his life, would define the nature and future of the Synod.⁸

Through the Altenburg Debate and the ongoing conflict with Grabau and Loehe, Walther’s response was consistent, as he modified his “Altenburg Theses” into *Church and Ministry*. Central to his Theses on the Church, is Theses IV:

This true Church of believers and saints it is to which Christ has given the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore this Church is the real and sole holder and bearer of the spiritual, divine, and heavenly blessings, rights, powers, offices, etc., which Christ has gained and which are available in His Church.⁹

⁵ Mary Todd, *Authority Vested*, c. 2000 by Eerdmans Publishing Co., p. 73. She goes on to observe that “Grabau and the Saxon pastors were arguing past each other, only with absolutism where orders were concerned. [The Saxon pastors] instead preferred that congregations exercise their Christian liberty, as they considered church orders and ordination middle matters, or *adiaphora*. But Grabau’s insistence on the way things had been done in Germany allowed no room for variance in practice in America,” p. 74.

⁶ Peperkorn, op. cit., p. 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Peperkorn, op. cit., p. 32.

⁹ *Moving Frontier*, ed. by Carl S. Meyer, c. 1964 by Concordia Publishing House, p. 164.

For Walther and the Missouri pastors, the Synod would be formed as a synodical union based upon congregational autonomy.¹⁰ It was also the congregation whose call gave credence and validity to the matter of the call into the pastoral ministry:

The Missouri Saxons, for their part, likewise emphasized the necessity of the call before anyone is permitted to carry out ministerial functions, though they argue strongly for the legitimacy of a call from laypeople without any pastors participating in the call process.¹¹

This understanding of the authority of the congregation in calling pastors, as well as the congregational governance of pastor and laity in cooperation was in complete deference to both Grabau and Loehe.

...more than congregation polity, the central issue over which Loehe disagreed with the governing structure set in place by the Missouri Synod constitution had to do with the office of the ministry. Like Grabau, Loehe believed in a strong clergy whose leadership over the congregation was indisputable. The ministry to Loehe was an elevated office, divinely instituted by God, and responsible only to God. His high church understanding led him to reject completely Walther's congregation basis of the call, believing that giving the laity control over their own congregations meant abdication of what was rightly clerical privilege.¹²

In the disputes over "Church and Ministry" in the mid-nineteenth century among the Lutheran confessionals, we see two parties and two practices develop. Grabau and the Buffalo Synod exercised a "representative" church government where the congregations were ruled by the pastor and a small council (*collegium*) and the Synod as a "consistory or board of adjudications" which saw the Synod was the church, making decisions for the whole church, which the individual congregations were to obey.¹³ Grabau was against congregational autonomy, which he saw as resulting in disunity of faith and practice.¹⁴

Walther and the Missouri Saxons formed their Synod to be confessional and congregational. Writing on congregational governance, Walther makes two

¹⁰ In his Thesis to the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, for the degree of Master of Sacred Theology, William J. Schmelder notes: "This thesis is of particular importance since here Walther is laying down the principle of congregational rights. He demonstrates conclusively from numerous quotations from the Scriptures that the power of the church rests with the congregation" (p. 85).

¹¹ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, "Grabau Versus Walther: The Use of the *Book of Concord* in the American Lutheran Debate on Church and Ministry in the Nineteenth Century," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 75:3-4, July/October 2011, p. 227.

¹² Todd, op. cit., p. 79.

¹³ Mayes, op. cit., p. 243.

¹⁴ Ibid.

important notes representative of his view on the congregational autonomy of the Synod:

Note 2. The fact that the keys were given to the whole church originally and immediately, that is to say, not mediately through an ordained ministry, and this in such a way that they belong in equal measure to every congregation, the smallest as well as the largest, is attested first of all by the public confessions of our church is unmistakable.

Note 3. The assertion that a local congregation, in order to be able to possess and exercise all rights of the church, must be externally joined to other congregations and with them be subject to one hierarchy and so is dependent on other congregations, is an error on which the papacy is based.¹⁵

Clearly Walther and the Missouri pastors rejected Grabau's and Loehe's higher view on both the Church and the Ministry, founding both upon a congregational viewpoint – one that continues to be the understanding of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Thus, the official statement of teachings of the LCMS includes these three statements:

OF THE CHURCH

30. The Original and True Possessors of All Christian Rights and Privileges – Since the Christians are the Church, it is self-evident that they alone originally possess the spiritual gifts and rights which Christ has gained for, and given to, His Church. Thus St. Paul reminds all believers: “All things are yours,” and Christ Himself commits to all believers the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and commissions all believers to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. Accordingly, we reject all doctrines by which this spiritual power or any part thereof is adjudged as originally invested in certain individuals or bodies, such as the Pope, or the bishops, or the order of the ministry, or the secular lords, or councils, or synods, etc. The officers of the Church publicly administer their offices only by virtue of delegated powers, and such administration remains under the supervision of the latter. Naturally all Christians have also the right and the duty to judge and decide matters of doctrine, not according to their own notions, of course, but according to the Word of God.

OF THE PUBLIC MINISTRY

¹⁵ C.F.W. Walther, *The Form of a Christian Congregation*, trans. by John Theodore Mueller, c. 1963 by Concordia Publishing House, pp. 14, 19,

31. By the public ministry we mean the office by which the Word of God is preached and the Sacraments are administered by order and in the name of a Christian congregation. Concerning this office we teach that it is a divine ordinance; that is, the Christians of a certain locality must apply the means of grace not only privately and within the circle of their families nor merely in their common intercourse with fellow-Christians, but they are required, by the divine order, to make provision that the Word of God be publicly preached in their midst, and the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, by persons qualified for such work, whose qualifications and official functions are exactly defined in Scripture.

32. Although the office of the ministry is a divine ordinance, it possesses no other power than the power of the Word of God; that is to say, it is the duty of Christians to yield unconditional obedience to the office of the ministry whenever, and as long as, the minister proclaims to them the Word of God. If, however, the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to remain faithful to Christ. Accordingly, we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded.¹⁶

That this understanding is consistent with Walther and the early Missouri pastors, consider this reflection upon the centennial of founding of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod:

It is not necessary for any Christian congregation to be joined with others into some larger executive or judiciary church body in order that it may exercise its divinely bestowed rights, but it may and should exercise these just because it is a local congregation. The congregation does not get its power from the ministry, but the ministry from the congregation.¹⁷

Likewise, in relation to the governance of the Wisconsin Synod and its difference from The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, the following is observed:

Concerning the relation between [the] local congregation and a group of congregations called synod, the Missouri Synod has always taught

¹⁶ *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, adopted by The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in 1932.

¹⁷ *The Abiding Word*, Volume 2, "The Lutheran Congregation," by George H. Perlich, c. 1947 by Concordia Publishing House, p. 451.

that the local congregation is a divine institution, while the Synod is a human organization that has only advisory powers.¹⁸

C. F. W. Walther in his *Church and Ministry* establishes for The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod the proper understanding of both the doctrine of the Church and the doctrine of the Ministry based upon the proof of Scripture and the testimony of both the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of the Lutheran church fathers (Luther being the chief witness). The controversy on Church and Ministry in the mid-nineteenth century was a choice between a hierarchical church polity or a congregational autonomy. Grabau and Loehe represented and maintained the former; Walther espoused the latter. The significance of this controversy is found in both the choice and subsequent practice of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: In 1851, and again in 1852, and even a century later in 2001, *Church and Ministry* was and continues to be affirmed as a doctrinal statement of the LCMS. This distinction is important, for a doctrinal statement is the official teaching of the Synod¹⁹ and both *Church and Ministry* and the *Brief Statement...* present a consistent understanding of the congregational nature of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, born of tumult and conflict...determined by the study of God's Word, the Lutheran Confessions, and testimony of the church fathers.

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¹⁸ *The Abiding Word*, Volume 3, "The Doctrine of the Church," by Alfred von Rohr Sauer, p. 333.

¹⁹ LCMS Bylaw 1.6.2 (b) Doctrinal statements set forth in greater detail the position of the Synod especially in controverted matters. (7) Such adopted and ratified doctrinal statements shall be regarded as the position of the Synod and shall be "accepted and used as helpful expositions and explanations" (FC SD Rules and Norm 10). They shall be honored and upheld ("to abide by, act, and teach in accordance with" [1971 Res. 2-21]) until such time as the Synod amends or repeals them.