

“Christ for Us: The Office of the Holy Ministry”

Bishops: Who Needs Them?

*The Power of Bishops as Taught and Confessed in the
Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions*

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church

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We Lutherans claim that the topic of justification is the chief article of the Christian religion. Luther, in the Smalcald Articles, says:

On this article rests all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubts about it. Otherwise, all is lost, and the pope, the devil, and all our adversaries will gain the victory.¹

Luther had the knack of weaving together the polemical and the devotional. It was not so much rhetorical skill as it was theological discernment. The battleground of our fight against the devil, the world, and our flesh is always the topic of our justification by God. This is where true faith and piety are grounded. For Lutheran pastors, the pastoral task always entails the theological task of bringing justification to bear on the matter at hand.

Jesus sent out the apostles with the command that they teach those they baptized to hold on to everything he said.² The apostle Paul applied this dominical mandate to himself, saying: “I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God.”³ This is the same man who wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”⁴ This does not mean that the whole counsel of God is subsumed under the topic of justification. It means that the whole counsel of God will be distorted in every respect if the free justification of the sinner by Christ’s blood is distorted in any respect. The biblical teaching on every article will be lost if we lose the purity of this central topic. Speaking of the locus or topic of justification, Martin Chemnitz writes:

Indeed, this locus is the pinnacle and chief bulwark of all teaching and of the Christian religion itself; if this is obscured, adulterated, or subverted, it is impossible to retain purity of doctrine on the other loci. On the other hand, if this locus is securely retained, all idolatrous ravings, superstitions, and other corruptions are thereby destroyed under almost every locus . . .⁵

The topic assigned to me is the power of bishops. We cannot understand the authority or power of the church or her ministers without a clear understanding of the doctrine of justification. This is so because the church consists of those who are justified through faith alone and the ministry of the church exists so that we may obtain this faith through which we are justified. We cannot understand the church’s ministry un-

¹ Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article I, paragraph 5, Tappert, page 292.

² Matthew 28:19-20

³ Acts 20:27

⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:2

⁵ Justification, by Martin Chemnitz, translated by J. A. O Preus, CPH, 1985, page 12.

til we know what makes the church the church. This will determine the purpose for which the ministry exists.

It is not enough to say that the office of bishop is grounded in Christ. Clearly, the apostles were the first bishops of the church and Jesus sent them out.⁶ The Christological foundation of the office of bishop means more than that the office comes from Christ, is established by Christ, and does what it does by Christ's authority. What kind of authority does Christ exercise among us? That is the critical issue to consider.

The crowds marveled over Christ's authority.⁷ His teaching, his power over demons, and his miracles of various kinds demonstrated divine authority. But where, that is to say, in what specific task, was his authority focused?

Jesus said to the paralytic lying on a mat, "Son, be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven you."⁸ Some of the scribes thought he was blaspheming. Who, but God, can forgive sins? Jesus proved his authority to forgive sins here on earth by healing the man whose sins he had just forgiven. It was an argument of cause and effect. By demonstrating his power over the effects of sin he proved his power to forgive sins. The supreme demonstration of that power was his resurrection from the dead after bearing in his body the sin of the world. It was on the day he rose from the dead that he breathed on his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any they are retained."⁹

Grace is not absolute. It depends on Jesus. It comes only from and through Jesus. The incarnation, obedience, suffering, and death, and resurrection of the Son of God are necessary for the forgiveness of sins. We locate the forgiveness of sins in Jesus: in his person and in his work. Upon the completion of his redemptive work he set the world free from sin. By his obedience he justified all those who fell in Adam's fall.¹⁰ The LORD our righteousness¹¹ is the Son of man who has authority on earth to forgive sins.¹² By the exercise of this authority he makes himself our Lord, that is to say, he robes us with his righteousness.

Note how Jesus exercises his authority to forgive sins. He did not say to the paralytic that forgiveness is available. He did not give him instructions on how to obtain it. He forgave him. Just so, he says to the men he sends out in his name, "if you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven them." The gospel is teaching. It is a proclamation. It is cognitive discourse. It is history with an interpretation.¹³ It consists in propositions that are true, so we may call it propositional truth, were we inclined so to speak. This teaching, this proclamation, this cognitive discourse concerning the historical Christ event, this propositional truth possesses divine power. It comes from the almighty God. This power comes from the obedience and the suffering of the God-man by whose authority it is spoken. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation because the righteousness of God is revealed in it from faith to faith.¹⁴ The gospel is more than

⁶ See "Did Jesus Institute the Pastoral Office" by Rolf Preus at: www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/PastoralOffice.html

⁷ Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:36

⁸ Matthew 9:2

⁹ John 20:23

¹⁰ Romans 5:19

¹¹ Jeremiah 23:6

¹² Matthew 9:6

¹³ 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

¹⁴ Romans 1:16-17

an announcement that forgiveness of sins is available. Were it merely an announcement of forgiveness available to those who qualify and not the actual impartation of the forgiveness of sins to sinners who hunger and thirst after righteousness,¹⁵ the ministry of the word would be a very different thing. In such a case, the preaching office would teach, but it would not bestow. It might encourage and persuade, but it would lack the divine authority to pronounce the sinner a saint. What the gospel is determines what the office of preaching is. Get the gospel right and you understand the office. Promote another gospel and you will be promoting a different office. It is folly to seek instruction from the Eastern Orthodox, or Rome, or Geneva, or American Evangelicalism on what the preaching office is all about. What you want to do is to go to those who know what the pure gospel is. Let them tell you about the preaching office.

If you look at the office that Jesus established in sending out his apostles, you see him bestowing the forgiveness of sins freely by his grace. Jesus says to preach the gospel¹⁶ that tells us that all our sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction. The gospel is the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. It concerns the forgiveness of sins. That is its subject matter. It gives the forgiveness of sins. Gospel preaching justifies. That's why preachers preach, according to the Augsburg Confession. Immediately after defining justifying faith, it begins its definition of the preaching office with the words, "that we may obtain this faith."¹⁷ Jesus says to baptize. As we confess, "I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins." He says to administer the Lord's Supper. "Do this in remembrance of me," he says. Do what? Eat his body and drink his blood for the forgiveness of sins. The teaching, the preaching, the catechizing, the administration of the sacraments – these duties of the office that Jesus established when, after redeeming the world by his blood, he sent out his apostles into all the world – are the means by which we obtain and possess the faith through which we are justified.

The teaching office teaches Christ. It teaches the divine doctrine about redemption, atonement, forgiveness, and salvation. It is teaching and it is bestowing. It is the impartation of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake. It is Christ's forgiveness to give. He gives it in such a way that it can be received only through faith.

The bishop is sent by Christ. The apostles and their successors are all sent by Christ. The New Testament identifies the apostles as bishops,¹⁸ presbyters,¹⁹ and pastors.²⁰ The term bishop, or overseer, is used interchangeably with the words pastor and presbyter. For example, in 1 Peter 5:2 St. Peter joins together as one activity the feeding of the flock with taking the oversight of the flock. Again, he joins these terms in 1 Peter 2:25 where he calls Jesus the shepherd and bishop of our souls. St. Paul uses the term bishop interchangeably with the term presbyter or elder, as in Titus 1 where, with reference to the appointment of elders he proceeds to talk about the qualifications of a bishop.²¹ In Acts 20:28 we have all three terms – elders, bishops, and the verbal

¹⁵ Matthew 5:6

¹⁶ Mark 16:15-16

¹⁷ AC V

¹⁸ Acts 1:20

¹⁹ 1 Peter 5:1

²⁰ John 21:15-17

²¹ Titus 1:5&7

form of pastors – joined together to refer to the same office and the same activity. The words teacher, preacher, and minister are also used to refer to the bishop/elder/pastor.²² This fluidity in the use of different terms to refer to the same office disallows the notion that there is a hierarchy of offices in the New Testament that are identified by these different terms. But the stronger argument against any divinely instituted hierarchy among the church's ministers is that the nature of the church's authority will not permit it.

If the church were a legislative body it would require a suitable governmental structure to carry out her purpose. A hierarchy among the clergy would be necessary. The law may be regarded as the great equalizer, but that's not true. It is only as the law condemns everyone to hell that it makes all men equal. To the extent that the law is crafted to be the means by which sinners climb the ladder into holiness it is anything but equalizing. It requires a hierarchy among those who administer it and it produces a hierarchy among those governed by it. It is a truism that the church tends to model her polity after whatever obtains among the civil authorities in her midst. As with most truisms, there is some truth to it. The more compelling reason for the development of a clerical hierarchy is the church's departure from reliance on her evangelical authority and her descent into legalism. This requires a political structure within the church that will impose the church's rules effectively. When the church's proclamation is the church's law her ministers cannot be equals. This would quickly degenerate into a situation where there are too many chiefs and too few Indians.

When the church's authority is the gospel, however, there cannot be a hierarchy of authority. The nature of evangelical authority disallows it. Here what the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII, has to say about it:

Our teachers hold that according to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of bishops is a power or command of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." According to Mark 16:15 he also said, "Go and preach the gospel to the whole creation."²³

Note three things. First, the power of the bishops is the power of the keys. The power of the keys belongs to the church, to the whole church, and to nobody but the church, as every Lutheran catechumen knows.

What is the Office of the Keys? It is the peculiar church power which Christ has given to His Church on earth to forgive the sins of penitent sinners, but to retain the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent.²⁴

The keys belong to the church immediately and to the bishops mediately. The power that is given to the bishops belongs to the Christians as Christians before it belongs to the bishops as bishops. The need of a regular call from the church is not just for the sake of doing things decently and in good order. It is on account of who has been given the office as their birthright. It is their birthright because it is through the gospel

²² Robert Preus notes that these are the terms used in the Lutheran Confessions as well. "The Doctrine of the Call in the Confessions and Lutheran Orthodoxy," Robert Preus, Luther Academy, 2001, pages 10-11.

²³ AC XXVIII, paragraphs 5-7, Tappert, pages 81-82.

²⁴ A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism, CPH, 1943, page 18

and the sacraments that the Holy Spirit justifies them through faith and gathers them together as the church. The means by which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies them must of necessity belong to them. A bishop knows that his mediate call is divine because the Christian congregation he is called to serve has the unalienable right to call qualified men to serve as their pastors, as we confess in the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope:

Where the true church is, therefore, the right of electing and ordaining ministers must of necessity also be. So in an emergency even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another. It is like the example which Augustine relates of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen), and the latter, after his Baptism, absolved the former.²⁵

There is no conflict between the power of bishops and the rights of the laity. Every Christian has the authority to absolve those who need to be absolved. It is precisely on account of our need for forgiveness that Christ established the pastoral office in the church. That the bishop is called by God through the church does not mean that his office derives from or is created by the church. As heirs of the theology of C. F. W. Walther, we need to be crystal clear on this. Walther does not teach that the preaching office derives from the priesthood of all believers. To the contrary, in his second thesis on the ministry Walther grounds the establishment of the office in the dominical sending of the apostles, citing Mark 16 and John 20 to prove his point.²⁶ That Walther's evangelical emphasis on the rights of the laity evolved during the twentieth century into a kind of democratic representative ministry doctrine whereby the public minister simply carries out whatever duties are delegated to him by a group of private ministers was probably inevitable, human nature being what it is, as folks naturally impute to the church the political doctrines of the civil arrangement in which they live. But that is not Walther's fault and it isn't the fault of his theology. It's the price of living in America where free sects prevail.

Second, Christ's sending out of the apostles to preach the gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments is the divine institution of the office of bishop. The dominical institution of this office, that is, the fact that the Lord Jesus established it, is critical to its evangelical character. If it is not Christological, it is not evangelical. Adolf Hoenecke, the great dogmatician of the Wisconsin Synod wrote:

The ordinary preaching office is the continuation of the extraordinary apostolic office, a continuation God himself wants. It is of divine institution in and with the apostolic office.²⁷

Third, the authority of this office is essentially evangelical. Again, from the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:

This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and by administering the sacraments either to many or to individuals, depending on one's calling. For it is not bodily things that are thus given, but rather such eternal

²⁵ Treatise, paragraph 67, Tappert, page 331

²⁶ C.F.W. Walther, "Theses on the Ministry With the Scripture-Proof," 1852, Walther and the Church, by WM. Dallmann, W.H.T. Dau, and TH. Engelder. St. Louis, CPH 1938, page 71

²⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Volume IV, Adolf Hoenecke, translated by Joel Frederich, Paul Prange, and Bill Tackmier, NPH, 1999, page 192

things as eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These things cannot come about except through the ministry of the Word and sacraments, for Paul says, “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” and Ps. 119:50 states, “Thy Word gives me life.”²⁸

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope says the same thing. Concerning the authority of the bishops it says:

The Gospel requires of those who preside over the churches that they preach the Gospel, remit sins, administer the sacraments, and, in addition, exercise jurisdiction, that is, excommunicate those who are guilty of notorious crimes and absolve those who repent. By the confession of all, even of our adversaries, it is evident that this power belongs by divine right to all who preside over the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters, or bishops.²⁹

Since the authority is evangelical, all those who exercise it are equal. The gospel knows no gradations. There can be no levels or degrees of gospel proclamation. To teach that there is a full use of the keys and a limited use of the keys³⁰ is to teach that the gospel can be truncated. The preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments go together. It is Christ, who established the office until the end of time by sending out the first bishops to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, who has joined gospel preaching to sacramental administration.

Martin Luther recognized the essential unity between preaching and baptizing and celebrating the Lord’s Supper. He placed preaching at the top and subordinated the administration of the sacraments to preaching. In his letter to the Christians in Prague in which he told them they didn’t need the ordination of a bishop approved by the pope for a valid ministry, he wrote:

If the office of teaching be entrusted to anyone, then everything accomplished by the Word in the church is entrusted, that is, the office of baptizing, consecrating, binding, loosing, praying, and judging doctrine.³¹

Luther is not saying that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are unimportant. He is rather placing the administration of the sacraments into their proper evangelical context. When the teaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are bound together the gospel of justification retains its centrality.

The centrality of justification is lost when the bond between teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments is broken. The concrete duties of the office – preaching, teaching, baptizing, forgiving and retaining sins, and administering the Lord’s Supper – become a formless and vaguely defined blob called the means of grace that are defined so as not to require pastors who baptize, absolve, preach, or administer the Lord’s Supper. After all, we wouldn’t want to depend on the authority of a man, would we? But wait. The multitudes marveled and glorified God for giving such power to men. It is not just the Son of man who has authority on earth to forgive sins. It is men. Through these men the Son of man speaks his almighty word, condemning the

²⁸ AC XXVIII paragraph 8, Tappert, page 82

²⁹ Treatise, paragraphs 60-61, Tappert, page 330

³⁰ For an example of this novel teaching, see “The Public Ministry of the Word,” adopted by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 2005 at <http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/beliefs/doctrinal-statements/the-public-ministry-of-the-word/>

³¹ Luther’s Works, American Edition, Volume 40, Fortress Press, 1958, page 36

impenitent and justifying the penitent. Talking about the means of grace is talking about going to church to hear the pastor preach, kneeling at the Lord's altar and eating and drinking the body and blood of Jesus, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins, taking to heart the absolution with the confidence that Jesus Christ himself is forgiving you your sins through the words the pastor speaks to you. Yes, and reading your Bible as well, for if the Bible does not remain the primary means of grace we have descended into sacerdotalism.

The best way to combat sacerdotalism is by affirming pastoral authority. The bishop does not need the permission of the assembly to bind the sins of the manifestly impenitent. He needs the authority of God's law to which the assembly, out of devotion to their Lord, gives its assent. The pastor has no authority other than the authority of God's word. Keeping this in mind will minimize power-plays between pastors and congregations. These conflicts arise because of human weakness and sin and then are exacerbated by the twin errors of antinomianism and gospel-reductionism. When divine law is negated human law will take its place. Divine law puts God in charge. Human law puts man in charge. Removing the mysteries of God from the minister's stewardship may be done in the name of empowering the laity but in fact it tyrannizes them. Reducing the means of grace to a formless abstraction to be formed by our own spiritual impulses takes it away from Jesus and puts us in charge. When the ministry becomes any use of the means of grace on behalf of the church³² religious people will determine the form it will take, crediting the Holy Spirit for whatever they come up with. To attribute to the Spirit what is not in the Word is enthusiasm.³³ Enthusiasts are not limited to tongues-speaking, idol-smashers. They may be quite conservative in appearance. If they belong to a church body that affirms the biblical teaching of the means of grace they will certainly affirm it as well. But they will attribute to the Holy Spirit their own decisions. They will do so without biblical warrant. They will claim spiritual guidance that somehow justifies claiming divine sanction for what God has not addressed in his holy Word. In response we must state it plainly: the office of bishop was not instituted by the Holy Spirit when he filled the apostles on Pentecost. It was not established by the church acting under the impulse of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus established the office of bishop before he sent the Holy Spirit. He determines what it is. He formed it. He doesn't leave it up to us. Jesus, the shepherd and bishop of our souls, feeds us and watches over us through the pastor and bishop of our congregation. Jesus, who has authority on earth to forgive sins, exercises that authority through the men he sends. The authority of the bishop is to do what Jesus gave him to do so that the baptized may be kept in the true and saving faith. Jesus knew what he was doing when he sent out the apostles. Jesus, to whom all authority in heaven and earth was given, gave to the first pastors of his church no civil or coercive power whatsoever. When men form this office they will inevitably alter it to make it more effective. So we see job descriptions for pastors. When Christ forms the office, the words of dominical institution determine what the office does. The difference is the difference between an executive and a pastor. These are entirely different kinds of au-

³² For an explanation and critique of this point of view, see Rolf Preus, "The Old Ministry Debate in the Synods of the Synodical Conference and in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Today," in Call and Ordination in the Lutheran Church, 2005 Pieper Lectures, Volume 10, Concordia Historical Institute and the Luther Academy, St. Louis, pages 43-61. See also "Does the Bible Teach a Limited Public Use of the Keys?" and "Clarifying the Issues in the ELS Ministry Debate" by Rolf Preus at <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/ClarifyingResponse.html>

³³ SA III VIII

thority. One rises out of perceived institutional needs and the other rises out of the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures. One is legalistic and the other is evangelical.

We are not the gospel. We cannot be the gospel. We can preach it. We can teach it. We can baptize, absolve, and celebrate the Lord's Supper. The office of bishop described in AC XXVIII is the office of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments identified in AC V. It is consistently defined in functional terms.

It is unfortunate that the term "functional" has come to refer to an erroneous opinion of the ministry currently popular among Lutherans in America that permits men and women, boys and girls, to carry out the functions of the office even though they do not hold the office itself. According to such an opinion, the pastor is somewhat like the coach who directs the team members to do what they do best. The ministry becomes a team effort as each member of the team uses whatever spiritual gifts he may have to contribute. This is the so called functional view of the ministry.

By all means, let us reject the so called functional view of the ministry. But let us also affirm that the ministry is essentially functional.³⁴ It is a matter of doing something, not being somebody. One may not do what is not given to him to do. No one who is not called into the office that Jesus established when he sent out the eleven as the first bishops/presbyters of his church may do what Jesus gave them to do. How can they preach unless they are sent?³⁵ "Nobody should publicly teach or preach or administer the sacraments in the church without a regular call."³⁶ This is our confession. How having laymen and laywomen teach adult Bible classes in the congregation conforms to this requirement of AC XIV requires a bit of verbal gymnastics, rendering the word "teach" to mean "oversee the teaching of someone else" when in biblical and confessional usage, oversight entails actual teaching. We have no right to slice and dice AC XIV into pieces seeking a sliver from which to justify whatever we are doing.

On the other hand, if anyone who is rightly called does not preach, teach, or administer the sacraments in the church he is not a minister of Christ or a steward of the mysteries of God.³⁷ The office is essentially functional. This is how the Scriptures and the Confessions speak. A bishop is not a bishop if he does not do the work of the ministry. There is such a thing as a dog that does not bark. There is no such thing as a bishop who does not preach the gospel of Christ and administer his sacraments. This is because the office is essentially functional. If it doesn't function as Jesus instituted it, it is not the office Jesus instituted.

Here we are faced with an irony that has existed among us for about a century. As we all know, early in the history of the church the title bishop began to be used in the church to refer to a pastor to whom had been given the oversight of other pastors. The Lutheran Reformation rejected the authority of the papal bishops, not because they rejected in principle the idea that one pastor would oversee the doctrine and life of other pastors, but because the papal bishops claimed such extra-biblical authority by divine right, burdened consciences with rules that were contrary to the gospel, and interfered with the God-given authority of the civil magistrates. Our Confessions make clear that the only divine authority of the bishops is the authority given to every pas-

³⁴ Robert Preus, "The Doctrine of the Call," pages 20-21

³⁵ Romans 10:15

³⁶ AC XIV, Tappert page 36

³⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:1

tor, that is, to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. But what have we inherited? An office of ecclesiastical oversight whose incumbents have no pulpit, no altar, and no assembly of Christians to whom they are obliged to preach anything at all! Men must be pastors to be eligible to serve as synod president or district president. They must be pastors to assume an office that has none of the essential functions of the pastoral office.

There may be no solution to this problem. We may just have to make the best of it. First of all, we should acknowledge that a bishop with no altar, pulpit, or live bodies gathered in front of him to hear him speak is an *unding*. Ecclesiastical supervision takes place by means of teaching and teaching requires that a man be entrusted with the teaching office. But despite the limitations placed on men by the bureaucratization of ecclesiastical supervision, we can be encouraged by theologians – such as the president of this district – approaching the responsibilities of an office that is not the pastoral office as if it were the pastoral office. During the nineties I was blessed with a pious and orthodox DP by the name of Ed Suelflow. I never called him President Suelflow. Since he was my father's age, I did not feel comfortable calling him Ed. I called him Pastor Suelflow even though he didn't hold the pastoral office. He acted like a pastor.

Christ continues to exercise his authority through the men he sends out to assume the office he established when he sent out the apostles nearly two thousand years ago. That immediate sending provides the authority to the mediate sending. The preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments by men sent by Christ through the church is the only divinely instituted church polity. Beyond that, we muddle through with what we have at hand. The effort to reestablish a Lutheran episcopacy here in America where there is a separation of church and state appears to be an exercise in futility. The issue always comes down to a battle between love for the divine doctrine and contempt for the divine doctrine. When the divine doctrine is set aside in the corner in favor of human rules and regulations, carnal power-plays take center stage, whether the external polity is episcopal, synodical, or congregational. We cannot solve what ails the church by setting up the right structure, as if the problem is systemic and not organic.

In his 1865 presidential address to the delegates to the Norwegian Synod convention, Rev. Herman Amberg Preus gave his arguments for joining the synod and for adopting its proposed polity. But first he said:

We do not believe that a constitution can create or reform a congregation or a church body. The Spirit of God alone can do that through the Word of the Lord and the Sacraments. Through them he regenerates people's hearts and works and preserves faith in them. Through faith they have fellowship with Christ and are members of the communion of saints, the true body of Christ and the true church of Christ. All errors, aberrations and imperfections in the church can be corrected and set right only through the Word of God being taught purely and in its entirety, and received and preserved in sincere faith.

Therefore, when people, be it in state churches, people's churches, or independent churches, turn their eyes first and foremost to the constitution-question and expect a new, glorious future from the adoption of this or that constitution, then

people only show in that way how far they have come away from the Word of God, the solid main pillar of the church.³⁸

Seeking to solve the church's problems by establishing the correct polity and rigorously enforcing it is to confuse law and gospel. The law coerces. The gospel persuades. Relying on coercion to obtain benefits for the church is to treat her as if she is a civil society and not the spiritual body of Christ. Again, from Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:

When one inquires about the jurisdiction of bishops, therefore, civil authority must be distinguished from ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Hence according to the Gospel (or, as they say, by divine right) no jurisdiction belongs to the bishops as bishops (that is, to those to whom has been committed the ministry of the Word and sacraments) except to forgive sins, to reject doctrine which is contrary to the Gospel, and to exclude from the fellowship of the church ungodly persons whose wickedness is known, doing all this without human power, simply by the Word.³⁹

The bishop does what God gives him to do without human power, simply by the Word. Just so, all church polity exists for this same end. Should devotion to the divine truth be lost it cannot be regained except by means of the divine truth. The bishop cannot get anyone to do anything willingly from the heart. He can only preach the Word that changes hearts. Only the Word itself brings about human devotion to it.⁴⁰ When we rely on the imposition of human rules and structures rather than on the inherent power of God's pure word to bring the church out of doctrinal indifference, spiritual lethargy, or whatever else ails her, our human rules and structures will assume hegemony over the church. Constitutions, bylaws, a plethora of manmade synodical offices and commissions, and other assorted adiaphorous political paraphernalia will take the place of the Holy Scriptures as the only rule and norm by which all teachings and teachers in the church shall be judged.⁴¹ Instead of serving doctrine, polity will trump doctrine. This scatters the flock.⁴²

Civil authority cannot justify the ungodly. When the church prefers civil authority to spiritual authority she despises her birthright. What makes the church the church is her justification by God through faith alone, apart from works, for the sake of the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. The pure, public, authoritative, efficacious preaching of the divine doctrine with justification at the center, as well as the right administration of the holy sacraments, is what cures whatever ails Christ's church on earth. This is Christ's authority to save sinners. The first duty of a bishop is to serve Christ as a faithful steward of these treasures.

A bishop may not claim the authority of the Fourth Commandment over the flock. I am a father. When my children challenged my authority by asking me why they had to do this or not do that my answer was, "Because I said so." I am a pastor. If a parishioner were to challenge my authority to say this or that my answer would not be,

³⁸ From the June 14-22, 1865 convention of the Norwegian Synod held at Highland Prairie Lutheran Church in Fillmore County, Minnesota. Translated from the Norwegian by Pr. J. Herbert Larson in 2003.

³⁹ AC XXVIII paragraphs 20-22, Tappert, page 84

⁴⁰ Isaiah 55:10-11

⁴¹ FC SD Rule and Norm, paragraph 3, Tappert, pages 503-504

⁴² John 10:16

“Because I said so.” It would be, “It is written.” Even the Lord of the church appealed to the written Word.⁴³

Our adherence to synodical rules and regulations is not a matter of submission to the Fourth Commandment. The principle by which the 16th century Lutheran fathers denied to the bishops civil authority is the same principle by which our 19th century Lutheran fathers denied to the synod any coercive or legislative authority but insisted that it was advisory only with respect to its relationship to the congregations. We do not owe obedience to any synod. We do owe the continuing debt of love for our brothers⁴⁴ and that is why we abide by the procedures and rules of the synod.

The only aptitude required of a bishop in the long list of qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 is the ability to teach. This teaching is from the pulpit, in the classroom and living room, at the hospital bed and nursing home – all over the place. It is patient, persistent, stubborn, and utterly devoted to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. It contains both the law and the gospel. It doesn’t shave off or embellish. Listen to the authoritative words of St. Paul as he describes what the bishop is to do:

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.⁴⁵

We are told that a demographic winter is descending upon our churches as fewer and fewer millennials attend services and the Midwestern based Lutherans are graying and dying. As churches shrink and budgets constrict, discouraged pastors and parishioners consult church marketing experts to help them do what God’s Word apparently is not doing. The churches keep shrinking, but are now addicted to shallow and moralistic songs, ten minute sermons littered with bad illustrations, liturgical confusion, and an unwieldy congregational bureaucracy in which there are directors with nothing to direct.

Better to confront the threat of decline with a renewed devotion to the task of teaching the pure and wholesome truth through which God saves sinners. The word of God is inherently efficacious. We don’t make it powerful by our eloquence or winsomeness. We don’t need to actualize it or provide the catalyst that will get it to do what it is supposed to do. God is in charge of his Word and he tells us to preach it and teach it. We can only preach it and teach it. That’s authority. That is the authority on which a man can rely with confidence that his labor in the Lord is not in vain. The bishop and those to whom he preaches take heart in the words God spoke through the prophet:

For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and do not return there, but water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth

⁴³ Matthew 4:4&7

⁴⁴ Romans 13:8

⁴⁵ 2 Timothy 4:1-5

from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Isaiah 55:10-11