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“Here Is the Church, Here Are the People . . .”: Ecclesiology Is the Servant of Soteriology¹

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Abstract: The point of this paper is “*Ecclesiology must always be the servant of soteriology.*” When this becomes altered, or confused, or worse, reversed, there are severe consequences. The Reformation came about because by the sixteenth century this had become reversed. In this article, I trace the history of one denomination’s struggle to keep ecclesiology in the service of the sharing of the saving gospel. It is a history of triumphs and failures, as it would be with any earthly institution.

Introduction

I have been asked to submit an article on missiology. Professional theologians are friends with many “ology” words, missiology being just one. To do justice to missiology it is necessary to visit the neighborhoods of ecclesiology and soteriology. You will understand why after spending a little time visiting with them.

There is an old children’s rhyme: “Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door and see all the people.” But this rhyme equates “church” with a building more than with people. We all know this is not the case. Equating “church” with a building is foreign to the Bible and therefore to the Lutheran Confessions.

In the “Prayer for the Church,” we pray,



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Grant we beseech Thee Almighty God unto Thy Church Thy Holy Spirit and the wisdom that cometh down from above, that Thy Word, as becometh it, may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ's holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve Thee and, in the confession of Thy name, abide unto the end, through Jesus Christ our Lord.² (Forgive me, I prefer this older version of the prayer).

It is a beautiful prayer—but why did we pray for this Word to be preached only to “Christ’s holy people?” While this is absolutely appropriate—I wonder if we should place such limits in a prayer for the Church. Shouldn’t we be praying that the Word be preached to all the world?

After the blessing of having worked at the congregation, district, and national levels in forty-five years of public ministry, I have heard numerous presentations on ecclesiology and how the body of Christ is organized to carry out its work. I would like to share some of what I have learned.

To begin, ecclesiology is the study of the Church. How do we define “church”? How is it organized? What is its function? Soteriology is the study of salvation. How does one come into a right relationship with God; how do we receive eternal life? How do we become connected to the living Savior, Jesus, the only One who can give us life in its fullest sense?

The point of this paper is that *ecclesiology must always be the servant of soteriology*. When this principle is altered or confused, or worse, reversed, there are severe consequences. The Reformation came about because by the sixteenth century the principle had become reversed.

A study of ecclesiology helps us address questions that confront churches today, questions such as, Is there one correct church body? Who can start a new church? Why do graduates have to be called by a congregation before they can be ordained? Why do Lutherans call their leaders pastors, but Roman Catholics call them priests? What is distinct about the call of a pastor? Why can only the pastor say, “In the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins?” Can a layperson commune the pastor? absolve someone? preach from the pulpit? consecrate the bread and wine at communion? read the Gospel lesson? teach? baptize? celebrate communion?

A study of ecclesiology helps us address these questions.

We might also ask, “*Why do these questions continue to come up?*” One reason is because while Scripture is very clear about soteriology, there is much less to guide us in ecclesiology.

The Bible is clear about soteriology; Jesus tells us in John 3:16, “God loved the world so much He gave His one and only Son—that whoever believes in Him will not die but have eternal life.” And Paul, in Ephesians 2:8–9, writes, “For it is by

grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—so that no human can boast”; and in Romans 3:20 ff., “God’s way of putting people right with Himself has been revealed—and it has nothing to do with the law. The law and the prophets gave their witness to it—but God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ.”

But Scripture gives us less direction for ecclesiology. *Coram Deo*, before God, we are given a few basics: the Church is the “bride of Christ” (Mt 9:15; Mk 2:19; and Lk 5:34). The Church is the living Body of Christ (1 Cor 12). The Church is “the assembly of all believers and saints” (AC VIII). Simply put, the Church is “those who hear the voice of the shepherd and follow.”

But, in terms of church organization, (*coram humano*—from a human perspective), we are not given very much about the formal principle for the organization of a church. Much of what we know as the organized church today is inferred from comments in Scripture, and much is according to human rules—set up to follow civil law. But what is the “material” principle, the foundational principle that gives meaning and direction to how the church is established? I suggest it is the Gospel, and thus, soteriological.

I repeat, my main point is that *ecclesiology is and must remain the servant of soteriology*.

To address this matter, I would like to look at five factors that gave the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod the ecclesiology we have today. There are certainly more than just these five, but these seem to me to have had the most influence.

Ecclesiology is
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the servant of soteriology.

After considering how we arrived at our understanding of church, I will suggest seven propositions that could keep ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology.

Five formative sources in the creation of our LCMS ecclesiology

1. Scripture: The Bible has given us direction for how we should come together to live out our calling as the body of Christ. These basic principles do not only inform but also determine our ecclesiology. This article is not an exhaustive study of all the Bible has to say about the church, but I will offer some of the most important of the principles set down by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, speaking to Peter, says in Matthew 16:18, 19,

I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have

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been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

Here the “you” is singular, although as Lutherans we have traditionally understood this as giving power to all who make the confession that Peter makes in Matthew 16. The Church as a whole, all who confess Jesus is Savior, the Church on earth has the authority to bind or loose sin. In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we teach that there is no one “correct” organized church body; rather, all who confess Christ as Savior are part of “the one true Church.”

The power of the whole Church to forgive sin can be seen more clearly in John 20:23. Speaking to the disciples this time, Jesus says, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them they are not forgiven.” The authority is not given to one individual, but to the disciples. We understand this to mean it was given to the Church.

The Church has the authority no other institution on earth has: the authority, as the body of Christ, to forgive sins.

And Jesus expands on this idea of the authority of the Church in Luke 22:24–27, spoken to the apostles. The authority they have is not power over others, but power *on behalf of* others. Jesus tells them that they are to be servants:

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.”

Scripture tells us the disciples of Jesus will live their lives as servants, living lives of forgiveness, sharing the love and forgiveness of God wherever they go, in word and in deed. “This is the *sine qua non*” for churches and, in fact, individual Christians to demonstrate their service to God.

2. Influences on present LCMS ecclesiology from Early Church history: From the very first, all the saints were expected to share the love of Jesus: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pt 2:9). This was spoken to the disciples in general, not just to the apostles.

But there were also specific roles for ministers, as in Ephesians 4:11–13:

And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the

saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

It is clear that these roles were “ministries,” meant to “equip” the Christians to live out their lives as servants of Christ in the world. One of these roles has not been understood in its fullest vocation—the role of the apostle, other than the original Twelve.

“Apostle” was a Jewish legal term. The apostle was authorized for a particular mission, to legally represent, with authority, the one who had sent him. In the Church, we have one authority: to forgive sins. In the New Testament and in the Early Church, the term “apostle,” while most often used to refer to The Twelve Apostles, is used for ministers beyond the Twelve: for instance, Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and James brother of Jesus (Gal 1:19) are called (in Greek) “*apostolos*.” When these designations are translated into English, most Bibles call them “messengers” or “representatives” to keep us from confusing them with The Twelve. I do think we lose something, though, by not recognizing the connotation the term “apostle” brings with it.

Apostles continued, among other ministries, into the second century. The Didache instructs how churches are to treat “apostles,” small “a”: “When an apostle comes into your town treat him as if he were the Lord!” The Didache says the local church is to feed such an apostle and give him a place to sleep. If the “apostle” stays one night, he is a true apostle. If two nights, beware. If three nights, this is a false apostle.”³

At this time the apostle apparently was a wandering missionary. Local church leaders were first called “presbyters” (elders) and “poimen” (shepherds). Gradually, as local churches grew in size and became more complicated in their administration, the local church leader was called “overseer” of life and doctrine; from the Greek term for “overseer,” we get the English word “bishop.” Presbyters and elders were “settled” ministries; they were part of the local church organization. As the church grew, bishops oversaw the life and doctrine of larger groupings of Christians. And the Early Church grew rapidly and grew large.

By 300 AD, ten percent of the Roman Empire was Christian and the church was expanding, even though Christianity was still not “legal.” The church could not own land, although a layperson might purchase a house where the Christians would gather. A Christian might be known because he or she was missing an eye, or a hand—because of persecutions. This began to change in 311 AD when Constantine became the emperor of Rome. His support for Christians provided fertile ground for the church to expand. And expand it did. Dioceses were the form of the Roman

Empire's administration. The church took over the term for its regional administration. We in the LCMS go by geography as well, but we say "districts."

"Bishops" were becoming heads of a "college" of local pastors and gained more oversight and authority. At the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, it was also decided that "bishops" should be elected by their own churches in the presence of one or more neighboring bishops. These bishops provided theological oversight, consultation, and were instigators of mission to go to new areas to establish new churches. In these days the meaning of "apostolic" was weighted towards a focus on maintaining correct teaching, but the term never lost its missionary connotation.

St. Augustine of Canterbury became known and is still known as the "Apostle to the English." Saint Bonaventure is called the "Apostle to the Germans." Saint Columba is the apostle to the Scots. And so on. These were all missionaries.

Thank God that we have district presidents today who continue to exert that kind of original apostolic-missional leadership.

3. A third influence on our ecclesiology was the Reformation of the Church. Gradually, certainly by the sixteenth century, soteriology had taken a back seat to ecclesiology in the Roman Catholic Church. Soteriology had become horribly distorted in the church prior to the Reformation. With the sale of indulgences, certificates sold for the forgiveness of sins, the distortion became apparent to almost everyone—so much so that it became a focus for the division of the Western Church.

The Lutheran Reformers' position was that the Roman Catholic Church had lost sight of the doctrine of grace, the free forgiveness of sins; therefore, it had lost its claim to be considered the authentic Christian Church.

Maintenance of the institution was put ahead of soteriology, that is, the building of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome caused great monetary needs, one response of which was to sell more and more indulgences. The need for funding for ecclesiastical needs superseded grace; and it was the sale of indulgences, payment for the forgiveness of sins, that pushed Luther over the edge.

Another thorn in the side of the "protestors" was the teaching that apostolic succession was necessary for the presence of the true Church.

The Reformation addressed these issues in the Augsburg Confession in Articles 4, 5, 7, and 14. It was the Lutheran theologians' position that the Roman Catholic accretions obscured Christian soteriology. In the Roman Church, forgiveness could only be obtained through a priest through the sacrifice of the Mass. The Lutherans reacted to this by emphasizing the role of the pastor as a shepherd who would emphasize grace, the free forgiveness of sins for the sake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God.

The Lutheran position was that it is not having a priest who stands in apostolic succession that makes a “valid” Christian church, as the Roman Catholic theologians taught. The true Church exists where the Word of Christ is being preached in accord with the Gospel and where the Sacraments are being administered rightly (ACC VIII).

4. Later Lutheranism: The Roman Catholic leaders accused the breakaway Lutherans of not being a part of the “true” church. Two of the reasons they gave were that the Lutherans were not “catholic” (everywhere in the world) and not “apostolic” (sending missionaries out into areas where the gospel had not been heard).

This accusation caused an overreaction by the Lutherans. Justinian Von Welz was a Lutheran layman who had a passion for the Gospel to reach the whole world. However, this idea was attacked by the seventeenth-century Wittenberg (Luther’s) faculty. Their position was that the Great Commission had ended. It was only meant for the time of the original Twelve Apostles.

This seems curious to me in that Luther’s Large Catechism, in the explanation of the second petition of the Lord’s Prayer, states the following:

Therefore we pray here in the first place that this may become effective with us, and that His name be so praised through the holy Word of God and a Christian life that both we who have accepted it may abide and daily grow therein, *and that it may gain approbation and adherence among other people and proceed with power throughout the world*, that many may find entrance into the Kingdom of Grace, be made partakers of redemption, being led thereto by the Holy Ghost, in order that thus we may all together remain forever in the one kingdom now begun. (emphasis added)

In the most deplorable instances, the Means of Grace became ends in themselves! It is like the carpenter who idolizes his hammer and saw, keeps his hammer and saw in good shape, but then never builds anything. Word and Sacrament are given to the Church to be means for equipping the saints of God to live out their faith in the world—for their own good, but also for bringing others to faith. Later Lutheran leaders in America would forcefully make this same point—particularly the leaders of the early the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Word and Sacrament are given to the Church to be means for equipping the saints of God to live out their faith in the world—for their own good, but also for bringing others to faith.

5. C. F. W. Walther, an early leader of the Missouri Synod, was a participant in one of the great theological controversies of the nineteenth century in America: A Lutheran church in Milwaukee had lost its pastor. The congregation wanted to authorize the principal of the church's elementary school to preach and to celebrate the Sacraments until a new pastor could be found.

The congregation contacted Walther in Missouri and Rev. Johannes Grabau in Buffalo to ask their advice. They wanted to know if they could authorize their called elementary school principal to preach and preside at the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The question was really deeper than that: What they were asking was, "where is the efficacy of the Means of Grace—in the pastor, or the congregation?"

Bishop Grabau of the Buffalo Synod taught there was one visible church on earth and it was the Buffalo Synod. Congregations were legitimized by having an ordained clergyman in the Buffalo Synod. For Pr. Grabau, the pastor was supreme in all church matters, including administration. Walther and the Missouri Synod disagreed.

Walther and the LCMS said no, the Church is "invisible," composed of true believers from every Christian denomination. The authority to forgive sins was given to the whole Church, and was transmitted by God through the Church to one whom the congregation calls to use them in public: the ordained pastor.

Walther and the early LCMS pioneers had come to their convictions through a fiery trial. As you may know, after the immigrants landed on the shores of the Mississippi, they accused their leader, a man they called bishop—Martin Stephan—of immorality and embezzlement. This created a crisis in the colony. If their bishop, the man who had led them, was found to be corrupt, could they be considered a true church?

It was with much soul searching and study of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions that they said, yes, we are a church, not because our leaders have been perfect, but because the Word is being preached in the purity of the Gospel and the Sacraments are being administered rightly among us. This event moved Missouri away from calling our spiritual leaders bishops; today we call them district presidents instead. Our forbearers were especially sensitive if they felt a leader was out for his own gain, or was overbearing, or accruing power to himself. And so they had a natural fear of leaders like Bishop Grabau.

In the theology of the Missouri Lutherans, laity normally serve the Lord in *their* "call"—their vocation. As the "royal priests of God" (1 Pt 2:9), they intervene on behalf of their family, their co-workers, their neighbors. They bring the love of Christ by word and deed into their workplaces, into their families, and into their communities. As such, they play a most vital role in the Church's mission force.

The difference is that laypeople do not represent the church in a public way, but serve under the supervision (*episcopo*) of an ordained pastor, as members of the Lord’s “holy nation” (1 Pt 2:9). Furthermore, as a statement that laity are the “royal priesthood” and do not give away their rights as priests, in LCMS churches laity may read the appointed texts in public worship—even the Gospel lesson, if asked to do so—and assist in the distribution of the Lord’s Supper and administration of Baptism. While the pastor oversees teaching, Sunday School teachers and Bible study leaders may, under supervision of the pastor, also teach. In fact, they extend the ministry of the pastor; otherwise, either the pastor will not be able to teach all who need instruction, or he will suffer in body and in spirit trying to meet the needs of too many responsibilities.

Laity may, under the supervision of their pastor, even preach from the pulpit from time to time when needed; they can absolve someone of sin—not in public, but in their private spaces; in an emergency, a layperson can perform a Baptism.

Laity may not, from a Lutheran perspective, consecrate the elements for Communion—except in an emergency, where there is no ordained pastor available—because Holy Communion is not necessary for salvation.

One of the clearest statements that “ecclesiology is the servant of soteriology” is an 1842 sermon preached by Walther. When you read it, you can feel the heartfelt desire of Pr. Walther as he bares his soul to his congregation. In the sermon, Walther gives direction for organizing ministries of the called pastor and the laity and implores both to give their efforts to bringing the love of Christ to those who are dying in their sins. The sermon makes clear that the Church as a whole is, as he says, a “mission house”—a mission society—in service of bringing the Gospel out into the world.

Then he continues: “Each Christian is a missionary, sent out by God into his own circle to convert others to Christ. . . . Women as well as men, young as well as old—All Christians are spiritual priests and teachers of the word. . . . The whole congregation shall be a holy people, a royal priesthood.”⁴

To say that the whole congregation has been commissioned to bring the saving love of Christ into a dying world is only to affirm with the founders of the LCMS that ecclesiology is the servant of soteriology.

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In the first part, I have shared highlights that have influenced the LCMS to have the ecclesiology it has today. I know this is an overview; whole books could and

have been written about this. The purpose of this article is to remind us of the past and to continue the discussion in the present.

Next we will consider some ways that churches can live up to this sacred heritage the Church on earth has received—and celebrate this way of “being church” that has been entrusted to us. The experiences of those who have gone before us are wonderful and marvelous gifts. They have kept ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology for over one hundred and fifty years.

Seven propositions to keep ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology.

Curvatus in se (“curved in upon self”) is the Latin phrase for what we call sin. But you probably know that, because we see it often in ourselves, in our families, and, yes, in our churches. The temptation to turn away from others and from the world to satisfy my/our needs dogs us, haunts us. For me, the sure sign of church-sin is when a community of Christians puts its needs above that of the people around them.

I served on the committee to call a new pastor to our church only one time. At the first meeting, the representative from the denomination told us, “Your work is to find the best pastor for the people of this congregation.” I had promised myself I would not say anything at the first meeting, but upon hearing that I couldn’t not raise my hand and ask, “Yes, but, aren’t we to find the best pastor for the neighborhood around us?” It was the mission question—and it assumed the church was a mission base and that the pastor we called would be a missionary. It also assumed that the pastor, like the best missionaries, would be among us to equip those in his care to be in ministry in their respective spheres of influence: their families, their neighborhoods, their places of work. How to do that—how to keep “ecclesiology as the *servant* of soteriology”—is the subject of the following propositions:

1. The primary mission of the Church is to make disciples of every nation,⁵ both more mature disciples and more disciples, using the Word as it is preached in its purity and the Sacraments as they are administered rightly.

It is probably not necessary to say it, but we must be careful to maintain the pure teaching of the Scripture. If we lose that, we have nothing worth saying.

But we human beings add accretions—more than is required. Some Christians add, “If your church is not growing, if it is not prosperous, then it is less than Christian—or at least not faithful.” Others will tell us that unless the church is poor and suffering, it is not being faithful. Why is that wrong? Because it bases the presence of the church on something other than the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the Sacraments.

It is becoming trendy today to say we will plant “distinctly” Lutheran churches. Of course, but that raises the question of what is “distinctly Lutheran.” Originally, “Lutheran” was a term to designate a Gospel reform movement within the Church catholic. Today we would hope this could be a Gospel reform movement within the world!—but more on this later. If by “distinctly Lutheran” all that is meant is that a church conforms to specific ceremonies or the look of a building or the way the church is titled or the pastor dresses, we have lost something important. We have lost a principled theology. We may even have lost the spirit of sacrifice and love that are basic ways we communicate to the world who we are.

If by “distinctly Lutheran” all that is meant is that a church conforms to specific ceremonies or the look of a building or the way the church is titled or the pastor dresses, we have lost something important.

2. A second proposition for keeping ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology is to reaffirm that the chief work of the office of public ministry is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:1–12).

The pastor has a role as an overseer of faith and life. In 1 Peter 5, Peter addresses “elders” and “shepherds,” whom he calls “overseers.” (The Greek word is “*episcopoi*.” These “oversee” the correct teaching of Law and Gospel and urge the Christians in their care to live lives that bring the love of Christ into their own spheres of influence. The office is not optional, but essential to “being the church.” The pastor, using the authority transmitted to him by the congregation, stands in the place of Jesus in public ministry (Jn 17:18; 20:21).

But the pastor does more than just mentor and maintain doctrine for a group already organized; there is the apostolic responsibility to order the church in such a way as to spread the Good News outside the congregation he serves.

In this respect, a congregation has the authority to add other ministers of the Gospel who are not “ordained” to Word and Sacrament ministry, but who nevertheless hold a public office in the church. Congregations are free to call a teacher, or DCE, or DCO, or parish nurse, or church council officers, or a team to begin a new mission. When they do, they are publicly recognizing specific people for a specific, well-defined ministry (as the “apostle” in the Jewish Talmud—Beracoth 5—was authorized for a specific task and for that task only). We are saying publicly, “You can trust these ministers. They have been ‘rightly called’ for the task to which they are assigned. They are under supervision of the one we called to preach and to teach the Gospel among us.”

Since the “keys” are given to the Church, the church must “rightly call” the pastor—*rite vocatus* (AC XIV). Without the call, there is no pastor. The service of ordination, on the other hand—for both Luther and Walther—is a tradition, an important tradition to be continued. When a pastor retires, he is still a “Reverend,” but unless he has a call from a congregation, he ceases to be a pastor.

The Lutherans saw the Anabaptists in Saxony as raising up anyone to be their pastor. Lutherans wanted to separate themselves from this practice. They wanted pastors who would be “rightly called”—*rite vocatus*. The term is not defined in the Lutheran Confessions, but has come to mean generally the *proper selection, preparation, affirmation by the broader church and the public call of a congregation*. How the call is carried out may change. At various times, it has been a somewhat informal process. When the blessing of a formal seminary education was not available, candidates could be tutored by someone authorized for this purpose and later tested to see if they had mastered the requirements for public ministry of the Word. It is critical to have this training and this testing, but how it is done can vary and has varied.

The pastor stands in public in the place of Jesus to exercise the church’s authority (the apostolic authority) to forgive sins. This right is given to the pastor as the steward of the gifts God has given to the congregation, through the call of a congregation. This authority is not “transferred to” or “given over to” the pastor. The church retains this authority. That is why in the LCMS a seminary graduate cannot be ordained until he has a call from a congregation. The congregation calls the pastor to, on their behalf, “oversee” the ministries and ministers of a congregation—assuring that the Word is being preached in its purity, that the Sacraments are being administered rightly, and that this Word “has free course.” The final “oversight” belongs to the congregation—who calls the bishop-pastor to do this on their behalf.

Again, as “bishop,” with the support of the congregation, the pastor can recruit others to help him carry out his ministry. Installation of Sunday School teachers, church council members, readers in church, communion assistants, a missionary to Muslims, a Mission Equipping Pastor, a team to begin work in a new area for a new congregation—all are appropriate.

Tenure for the pastor is not an essential part of a call. Congregations can choose to give a tenured call to a pastor, a teacher, DCE, DCO, or others they deem

But the pastor does more than just mentor and maintain doctrine for a group already organized; there is the apostolic responsibility to order the church in such a way as to spread the Good News outside the congregation he serves.

important for the continuation of ministry. Recently it has been wise to say that only the called minister should have tenure. But this is a human decision.

Since the “keys” are given to the Church, Christians do not give up their Gospel rights, at any age. Luther gives an example of preparing confirmation age children to share the Gospel; in case they were abducted in wars with the Muslims, they could confess the faith to them.

Something that is rarely discussed among us is that, even though we have strict rules for calling a tenured minister, we are not as privy to guidelines to “un-call” a called worker who has tenure. In some instances, these workers must be accused of false doctrine or immorality to be relieved of their position. I must say that this stance causes all kinds of mischief. But, if the congregation has the right to call, why can’t it decide that its pastor no longer should stand in the place of Christ to minister to them? This decision, of course, should not be made lightly; but I can see no biblical reason that it could not happen—and might very well result, in many instances, in the Gospel’s having a greater chance to be released into the world.

3. To keep ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology, each Christian congregation needs to seek the support of the wider church.

In interpretation of doctrine and in practice and in the calling of public ministers of the Word, it is wise to seek the counsel and endorsement of the wider church. Christian people and congregations (*deo humano*) are sinful. They can turn inward—as I said earlier, one definition of “sin” is *curvatus in se* (St. Augustine’s phrase, by the way), that is, “turning in on self.”⁶ It is a temptation for churches as well as individuals.

There are exceptions to the benefit of receiving support from the broader church, for instance, in times of emergency: Deacon-Evangelist Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, and baptized him without consulting with St. Louis, I mean Jerusalem. Peter in Acts 10 baptized the gentiles in Cornelius’ house without getting permission, but his preaching received the blessing of the Holy Spirit and resulted in the Gentile Pentecost.

The church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:22) did send a representative to Antioch to understand what the Lord had been doing in raising up a church there, one that had been started without the oversight of the Twelve. The work among gentiles in Antioch began as a result of the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen. The representative sent by Jerusalem, Barnabas, encouraged the growth of the church and, on the face of it, on his own brought in a former outcast, Paul, to oversee the further proclaiming of the Gospel.

St. Cyprian of Carthage in the third century said, “He cannot have God for his Father who does not have the church for his mother.”⁷ But at times individuals want

to “have church” alone watching a sunset; some congregations may not take the ministry of their district seriously and keep themselves away and be non-supportive. Some districts would like to ignore the national synod. At times our synod may have trouble relating to other Christians, although the purpose of the synod, and districts, is to “strengthen congregations and their members in giving bold witness by word and deed to the love and work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and extend that Gospel witness into all the world.”⁸ There may be good reasons for this—or—it may be simply sin, “*Incurvatus in se.*”

4. A fourth principle for keeping ecclesiology as the servant of soteriology: Every Christian has not only the right, but the duty to share his or her faith.

Martin Luther saw all the tasks of one’s life as providing opportunities to express our faith. According to Luther, “The great flaw of the medieval monastic system was that it limited service to God to ‘religious acts.’”⁹ The monastic tendency was to “denigrate (the structures of society) as inherently evil—and to withdraw from them into a supposedly holier way of life.”¹⁰

But God calls us to express our baptismal identity through everything we do, including work. God opens doors at work to demonstrate the love of Jesus through honesty, through mercy, sometimes through sharing the Word of God. All this means that the everyday work of a Christian is a holy calling, a calling to live in gratitude to God and to serve others.¹¹

Our synod’s emphasis on “martyria” (witness), “koinonia” (fellowship) and “diakonia” (service) is right on.

The church will make every effort to equip laity to bring the love of God into their vocations.

Now, this is done primarily out of love. Love is the final guide. If you have a starving community and you have a warehouse filled with food but don’t tell anyone—let them come to us but not go to them—this is not love. Out of love, the Lord came to us: “God loved the world so much” (Jn 3:16). “By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35).

Rev. Khurram Khan reaches out to Muslims in the United States, but the Lord grabbed hold of Khurram in a Bible study in Saudi Arabia. Khurram (a civil engineer from Pakistan) was working with the Arab American Oil Company when he and his family were invited by Mr. Howard Russell to learn more about Jesus. It is against the law to study the Bible in a group in Saudi Arabia. The people in the group took a grave risk meeting as they did.

But in that class, Khurram for the first time heard the Gospel (Howard Russell is a committed LCMS member in Southern Illinois—and Lutherans know their Gospel). The Spirit of Christ moved Khurram to want to dedicate the rest of his life

to sharing this love with Muslims. Today he is a graduate of the Fort Wayne Seminary’s EIIT program and as the head of People of the Book Lutheran Outreach oversees more than twenty missions reaching Muslims in the United States and six in Pakistan and India.

People of the Book Lutheran Outreach has reached out to Muslims with the love of Christ, but there are some involved in outreach to Muslims who demonstrate a mean spirit. That will not change hearts.

The Church Father, Tertullian, in the third century described how *outsiders* see the Christians: “‘Look,’ they say, ‘how they love one another’ (for they themselves hate one another); ‘and how they are ready to die for each other’ (for they themselves are readier to kill each other).”¹²

They’ll know we are Lutherans by our hymnal, yes . . . ; by our church architecture, ok . . . ; by use of the Means of Grace, yes . . . ; but, in the end, the most biblical characteristic of Lutherans is that they will know we are Lutherans by our love.

5. The Church is not an end in itself; it is the servant of Christ, and therefore of all.

As Jesus left His Father’s house to engage the world, His people do the same.

In St. Louis, Lynn and I belonged to Historic Trinity in Soulard, Walther’s church and the place where early formative meetings of the Lutheran Hours Ministries were held. Trinity had been a thriving congregation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—serving the needs of new immigrants, helping them find housing and jobs.

By the middle of the twentieth century, German immigrants were no longer coming to St. Louis in large numbers, and Trinity had declined to the point where, in anticipation of the closing of the church, the trustees started a foundation to preserve the church building as a museum.

However, a new pastor with a new vision was installed. The neighborhood around Trinity had declined, and there was a need for food distribution to homeless men. The church also joined in partnership with a Roman Catholic Church a block away to support their homeless shelter. This brought a different kind of person into the church—we called them angels. They were on medication or off their medication. In the middle of the service, one of the angels might get up and begin to sing, or preach. The congregation was gracious and patient.

The strange thing was this became attractive to people from the suburbs who were looking for a church that was making a difference in its community. Some of you know the Ted Drewes ice cream store in St. Louis. Ted and his wife, Dottie, joined Trinity. People from the International Center and CPH came to join. After a

few years, the congregation voted to rehab the parsonage into a soup kitchen and meeting rooms and offices for community groups. In other words, Trinity reengaged its community with the love of Jesus. Today the congregation is strong and growing.

The Church in one sense does not have a mission. Instead, the mission of God creates the Church. The invisible Church will continue forever. The visible church is governed by bishops, tax laws, and Concordia Benefit Plans. The visible church has a cycle of life—comes into existence, matures, declines, and dies. In the LCMS, in studies we did in the late 1990s, we saw that the typical LCMS congregation grew from 0–30 years of age. From 30 to 60 years, there was a plateau in worship attendance. From 60 to 80 years of age, congregations generally declined. Many congregations did not last past eighty years. They may still have their doors open, but their ecclesiology no longer served soteriology in any significant way. Church councils and voters meetings become more concerned with paying the bills and keeping the roof in good repair and pay less attention to saving souls.

The question that begs to be asked is—are we planting enough new churches to replace those whose life cycle is ending?

6. A sixth presupposition: While doctrine remains unchanged, the church can change its polity and practice.

Changes may occur in ecclesiology to better serve soteriology. By that, I mean in the things that can be changed *coram humano*, things not required by Scripture as understood by us through the lens of the Lutheran Confessions. Such things include forms of worship.

At times we will emphasize the needs of a “settled” church—a church existing in an obviously Christian culture, but change is required when the culture turns away from Christian values and ideals. The way a church lives on a mission field is and has to be different from the church in a Christian country. The way the church worships will be different. When many have not grown up within the culture of the church, there has to be more effort to form new converts. Preaching will reflect more on the contrast between the culture and the church.

There is no one form revealed in Scripture for music, or for order—although a while back the chairman of the LCMS Commission on Worship did suggest elements that should be included in a Christian worship service. The earliest Christians worshiped in Hebrew; does that mean we must do the same? They met in private homes for worship. Is this more authentic than in a public space like a church building? They used musical instruments to lift their joy and thanksgivings to the Lord, but none of these were an organ. At first, the worship leaders were Jews; must that be the case now?

The last word about worship forms in my opinion is Augsburg Confession, Article 24, “The chief purpose of all ceremonies is to teach the people what they need to know about Christ.” I would say this also applies to all forms of church administration; essentially, this is the point of my presentation.

7. We should not add to what the Holy Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions say about ecclesiology.

If it is not in the Bible and the Confessions, we are free to change. Roman Catholics have another criterion; they add “tradition.” So their pope and bishops and priests are the bearers of the tradition.

There has been talk suggesting we should add “tradition” and have four *solas*, “*Sola gratia, Sola fide, Sola scriptura, Sola tradition.*” I am not for this, because it elevates human rules and guidelines to a par with gifts given to us by the Lord Himself. I think this is very dangerous.

The Bible says little beyond some very basic principles of ecclesiology (see Part I of this paper); the Lutheran Confessions are the same. When we begin to add more “essentials” to the basics we have received, we need to be very careful. Soon the simple truths can become unrecognizable.

Conclusion

This has been a short paper on a very large topic. I apologize if I have not said everything clearly or fully enough. I have tried to be faithful to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

Ecclesiology is the servant of soteriology because the Church is the body of Christ and Jesus, our Savior, said “I came to serve, not be served.”

I have tried to be faithful to the genius of the founders of our synod and to the servant heart they displayed.

That servant heart, which always accompanied the heartfelt beliefs of the founders of the Missouri Synod, continues to reverberate down the centuries. It has been made real in the tens of thousands of times pastors and laity have gone outside of the four walls to share their faith.

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By the grace of God it will continue to be real among us—even more than it is today. And so maybe we can change that old children’s rhyme—maybe from now on we should say, “Here is the church, here is the steeple. Open the doors, and send out the people.”

Endnotes

¹ This article is based on a presentation made first at a convention of the Texas District in June 2012 and later revised for presentation at the New Jersey District Pastoral Conference in October 2013.

² *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 305.

³ Didache, Part III, 11.3

⁴ Published in *Festklänge* (CPH, 1892), trans. by Bruce Cameron (July 1993).

⁵ J. A. O. Preus, “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” p. 2. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1973). Adopted as resolution 3-01 at the 1973 Convention of the LCMS, 127–128.

⁶ It was Augustine of Hippo who first coined the phrase *Incurvatus in se*. Martin Luther expanded on this in his Lectures on Romans and described this state as: “Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.”

⁵ Cyprian, *Treatise on the Unity of the Church*, 6.

⁸ 2010 Handbook of the LCMS, p. 13, Article III, Objectives, #2.

⁹ D. Michael Bennethum, *Listen! God calling!* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² Tertullian’s “Apology,” Chapter 39.7 (circa 200 AD)