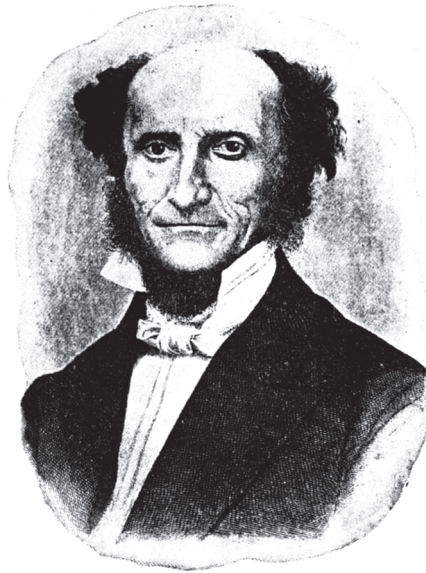


## The Office of the Keys in the Ecclesiology of C.F.W. Walther and the Lutheran Confessions



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**T**he doctrine of the Church is central to understanding the birth of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the theology of one of the synod's primary fathers, C.F.W. Walther. Indeed, it was differences between Walther and other Lutherans such as Wilhelm Löhe and J.A.A. Grabau over this article of faith which drove a wedge between their respective followers, dividing the forces of the "Old Lutherans" in this country as they confronted the

apparent-confessional indifference of “American Lutherans” such as S.S. Schmucker.

Both friends and enemies of Walther and the Missouri Synod have usually viewed the theologian and his synod as “Repristinators” of traditional Lutheran theology.<sup>1</sup> However, is this assessment accurate? The first portion of this paper will examine a key element of Walther’s doctrine of the Church: his belief that Christ has “given the keys of the kingdom of heaven” directly to “[t]he Church...the communion of the saints”<sup>2</sup> and that these saints individually possess the same authority as the pastor, only using it in a different way. The second portion of this paper will be an examination of the Lutheran Confessions with regard to their teachings concerning the Office of the Keys and the relationship between the keys and the Office of the Ministry and the Priesthood of all Believers.<sup>3</sup>

## I.

It seems unlikely that Walther’s formulation of the doctrine of the Church would have occurred if not for the fall of Bishop Martin Stephan. Until this crisis, Walther and the other immigrant Saxon pastors were convinced of the necessity of an episcopal structure:

We have been instructed by you [Stephan] in many things, and from this instruction an abiding conviction has resulted in us that an episcopal form of polity, in accord with the Word of God, with the Old Apostolic Church, and with our Symbolical Writings, is indispensable. Such a form of polity, in which a greater or smaller number of clergymen are subordinated to a bishop in the government of the Church and form a council with him and under his leadership, is therefore our joint, fervent, and earnest desire.<sup>4</sup>

When the little Saxon community was wracked by confusion and a sense of betrayal after Stephan’s exclusion they began asking the question, “Are we still part of the Church?” This spiritual struggle

resulted in Walther's "Theses on the Church" presented during the Altenburg debate in 1841, and, eventually, in his work known as *Kirche und Amt*.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have observed that "The theses which Walther defended in this debate [at Altenburg] are basic to all his later writings on Church organization..."<sup>6</sup> The theses are as follows:

Thesis I.

The Church, in the proper sense of the term, is the communion of saints, that is, the sum total of all those who have been called by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel from out of the lost and condemned human race, who truly believe in Christ, and who have been sanctified by this faith and incorporated into Christ.

Thesis II.

To the Church in the proper sense of the term belongs no godless person, no hypocrite, no one who has not been regenerated, no heretic.

Thesis III.

The Church, in the proper sense of the term, is invisible.

Thesis 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.

Thesis V.

Although the true Church, in the proper sense of the term, is invisible as to its essence, yet its presence is perceivable, its marks being the pure preaching of the Word of God and the

administration of the holy Sacraments in accordance with their institution by Christ.

Thesis VI.

In an improper sense the term “Church,” according to Holy Scripture, is applied also to the visible sum total of all who have been called, that is, to all who profess allegiance to the Word of God that is preached and make use of the holy Sacraments. This Church (the universal [catholic] Church) is made up of good and evil persons. Particular divisions of it, namely, the congregations found here and there, in which the Word of God is preached and the holy Sacraments are administered, are called churches (particular churches), for the reason, namely, that in these visible groups the invisible, true Church of the believers, saints, and children of God is concealed, and because no elect persons are to be looked for outside of the group of those who have been called.

Thesis VII.

Even as the visible communions in which the Word and the Sacraments still exist in their essence bear, according to God’s Word, the name of CHURCHES because of the true invisible Church of the true believers contained in them, so likewise they, because of the true, invisible Church concealed in them, though there be but two or three, possess the POWER which Christ has given to His entire Church.

Thesis VIII.

While God gathers for Himself a holy Church of the elect in places where the Word of God is not preached in entire purity and the holy Sacraments are not administered altogether in accordance with their institution by Jesus Christ,—provided the Word of God and the sacraments are not utterly denied but essentially remain in those places,—still

everyone is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to flee from all false teachers and to avoid all heterodox churches, or sects and, on the other hand, to profess allegiance, and adhere, to orthodox congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever he finds such.

A. Also in erring, heretical congregations there are children of God; also in them the true Church becomes manifest by means of the remnants of the pure Word of God and the Sacraments that still remain in them.

B. Everyone is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to flee from all false prophets and to avoid fellowship with heterodox churches, or sects.

C. Every Christian is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to profess allegiance, and adhere, to orthodox congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever he finds such.

#### Thesis IX.

The only indispensable requisite for obtaining salvation is fellowship with the invisible Church, to which all those glorious promises that concern the Church were originally given.<sup>7</sup>

A monumental change had occurred in Walther's understanding of the doctrine of the Church. Having espoused an understanding which saw the Church centered on the Office of the Ministry—the episcopal form of polity having been deemed “indispensable”—in 1839, Walther's 1841 theses on the Church never directly mention the *need* for the pastoral office; instead, the only “indispensable requisite” for salvation is “fellowship with the invisible Church,” fellowship which is attained by faith in Christ because of the work of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel.<sup>8</sup> “Gospel” is left very nebulous, and we are not directly told that the Holy Spirit only works through the means of grace.<sup>9</sup> The Word and Sacraments are mentioned primarily in terms of locating the visible Church.<sup>10</sup>

Having *defined* the ‘invisible,’ or ‘true,’ Church in the first three theses, Thesis IV turned to the *power* of this Church: the Office of the Keys. The 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.” Indeed, we are told in Thesis VII that in “the visible communions in which the Word and the Sacraments still exist in their essence” are only called Church because of the presence of true believers.” Indeed, such “visible communions” only “possess the POWER which Christ has given to His entire Church” because of the presence of true believers. Essentially, it is the presence of believers possessing the Office of the Keys which makes churches part of the “Church” and it is through the presence of such believers that churches possess the power to forgive sins. Because the believers possess the keys, the Church bears “the spiritual, divine, and heavenly blessings”—presumably including the means of grace. The “offices” of the Church are also among the blessings given to the Church.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially, then, Walther’s view on the doctrine of the Church is as follows: The Church consists only of true believers. These true believers are the elect who have been called by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. As a result of their status as believers, the Church possesses the Office of the Keys directly, and therefore possesses all of Christ’s blessings to His Church, including the means of grace and the Office of the Ministry. Of primary importance is fellowship in the invisible Church, which possesses the keys—to this elect number are given the blessings. The blessings are secondary: only the fellowship of faith is “indispensable” to salvation. The “offices,” too, must be considered secondary, since Walther writes elsewhere that “when the Smalcald Articles say the keys belong to the church or to the whole church, this does not mean that only entire congregations which have a pastor, possess the keys through him, as a whole [congregation], but even ‘two or three’, who are gathered in Jesus name, therefore in short, all true believing Christians.”<sup>12</sup> Indeed, “all believing Christians, have the command

and therefore the right to preach, therefore also have the office originally.”<sup>13</sup> To be a pastor means one carries out the functions of the pastoral office: “Even as a person by what he does—what a writer, a porter, a teacher, a song leader etc., must do—becomes a writer, a porter, a teacher, a song leader, etc., so also a person becomes a pastor by doing what a pastor must do... he administers his office, which is what makes a person a pastor.”<sup>14</sup> The “offices” are a gift given to the Church, possessing *nothing* which is not given to every individual believer: “Let the papistic Lutherans show that a pastor has something different to do than every Christian is admonished in the Word of God to do, or let them confess that they themselves have no Christian church office. For the fact that pastors exercise the office publicly in behalf of the congregation and the common Christians only privately, proves, as already said, not a different office which pastors and Christians have, but only a different way and manner of exercising the office of the Word, a different use of the same.”<sup>15</sup> When Grabau and the Buffalo Synod declared, “Church and teacher of the church are divinely combined, where the one is, the other is to be. They are correlatives; as no bride can be without a bridegroom,” Walther shot back, “What do you think, dear reader of this Buffalo teaching?—I probably do not need to tell you what is to be judged concerning it. It is clearly—antichristian! May God preserve our poor church against such a dreadful error.”<sup>16</sup>

## II.

### The ‘Whole Church’ and the Three Estates.

Walther’s position having been briefly surveyed, the question remains as to whether this position is consistent with that taken by the Lutheran fathers in the Symbolical Books. For this survey, we will turn primarily to the Augsburg Confession and the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope. In conclusion, we will briefly examine one example of how these symbols were interpreted during the Age of Orthodoxy (1580-1713).

The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope provides Walther one of the key passages in the defense of his position. As Walther declared on one occasion, “The chief passages which in the public confessional writings of our orthodox church treat of this [that the keys were given to the whole Church] are found in the appendices of the Smalcald Articles, which as a more recent scholar says, was the ultimatum, i.e., the final decision and the letter of renunciation the Lutherans finally gave to the papists after they had rejected the Augsburg Confession and its Apology.”<sup>17</sup> These passages are as follows: “...[I]t is necessary to confess that the keys pertain not to the person of a particular man, but to the Church, as many most clear and firm arguments testify. For Christ, speaking concerning the keys (Matt. 18:19), adds: “If two of you shall agree on earth,” etc. Therefore He ascribes the keys to the Church principally and immediately; just as also for this reason the Church has principally the right of calling.” (§24)

The German translation of the Treatise goes on to add:  
 For just as the promise of the Gospel belongs certainly and immediately to the entire Church [*der ganzen Kirchen*]<sup>18</sup>, so the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to everyone who desires it, just as it is actually manifest that the Church has the power to ordain ministers of the Church. ... Likewise Christ gives supreme and final jurisdiction to the Church, when He says: “Tell it to the Church.” (§24)

Walther goes on to declare concerning the first of these quotations: “These words are of the greatest importance. Every Lutheran Christian ought to know them by heart, especially now, or to find them quickly in his Book of Concord. They are a conclusive proof that the symbolical books of our orthodox church were written under the special providence of God.”<sup>19</sup>



But what do these passages actually *say*? Is it indeed the same to say “*the Church* possesses the keys immediately” and “*all believing Christians*, have the command and therefore the right to preach, therefore also have the office originally...”<sup>20</sup>? Again, the Confessions declare, “the keys belong immediately to the entire Church, because the keys are nothing else than the office whereby this promise is communicated to everyone who desires it...”—the keys are equated with “the Office”. Does this mean that because the Office belongs to “the entire Church” it therefore belongs to every individual Christian?

The private writings of the Lutheran Fathers provide insights into what they meant by the term, “*der ganzen Kirchen*.” The Fathers saw the “entire Church” as consisting of three ‘estates’: the ministry, the Christian magistracy, and the laity. No part, with the others excluded, was the “entire Church.” It is asserted that the passage, “...it is clear that the Church retains the right to elect and ordain ministers” (§72) ascribes to the laity, to the exclusion of the clergy or magistracy, the power to call a man to the Office of the Ministry, but such a view is not in keeping with the views of Philip Melancthon, the author of the Treatise. Melancthon restated the ideas of § 72 in his *Loci communes* (1555): “God wants an office and ministry to be in the Church, and he maintains such. Because a ministry is necessary and must be maintained, it follows that the Church has the power and is obliged to choose qualified persons as often as necessary, in the case, if the titled bishops and their supports are persecutors, and will not give to the Church qualified shepherds.”<sup>21</sup> However, the reformer went on to make it clear this did *not* mean the laity would be acting alone: “For these reasons which are well grounded and corroborated, the Church shall and must choose and confirm qualified shepherds if the titled bishops and their supporters are persecutors. And from this is it clear that the ordination, if it occurs through our churches *and* shepherds, is right and Christian.”<sup>22</sup> (Emphasis added) Clearly, Melancthon was setting forth the validity of presbyterial ordination (as opposed to the Roman Church’s insistence on episcopal ordination)—for the

laity to call and ordain, to the exclusion of the clergy, would *not* be “right and Christian.”

Later Fathers also echoed this understanding of the estates of the Church. Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), for example, treated this question at length in his *Enchiridion*, which was used for the bi-annual examination of the clergy under his authority. Chemnitz emphasizes that it is not right when either the ministers or the magistrates exclude the other estates from the calling process, but he also firmly declares: “It is clearly and surely evident from both the commands and the examples of Scripture, that when the ministry is to be entrusted to someone through a mediate call, those who are already in the ministry and profess sound doctrine are to be used. Tt 1:5; 1 Ti 4:14; 2 Ti 2:2; Acts 14:23.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, when he poses the question, “But do Anabaptists do right, who entrust the whole right of calling to the common multitude (which they take the word *ekklesia* to mean), with the ministry and the pious magistrate excluded?” Chemnitz gives the following answer:

By no means. For the church in each place is called, and is, the whole body embracing under Christ, the Head, all the members of that place. Eph. 4:15-16; 1 Co 12:12-14, 27. Therefore the call belongs not only to the ministry nor only to the magistrate, so also is it not to be made subject to the mere will [and] whim of the common multitude, for no part, with either one or both [of the others] excluded, is the church. But the call should be and remain in the power of the whole church, but with due order observed.<sup>24</sup>

Such an understanding of the entire Church consisting of three estates can be seen in the writings of other Fathers. For example, we read in Leonard Hutter (1563-1616):

9. How manifold is the call to the office of the ministry?

Twofold. One an immediate or direct call, as was the call of the prophets and apostles, which was given by God Himself without the employment of any means, and

which ceased with the prophets and apostles; the other, a mediate call, such as is now given by the church, which consists of the higher powers or government, the ministers of the church, and the remaining hearers, commonly called the people or laity.<sup>25</sup>

And again, in Nicholaus Hunnius (1585-1643): “781. B. *How are these ministers to be called?* This is done either without any *outward means*, as was the case with the Prophets: Isa. 6:8,9; Jerem. 1:15ff. and as the Lord Jesus called the Apostles, Matth. 4:19,21, etc.—Or certain persons or classes of the church are entitled to this privilege, viz. the *ministers*, the *authorities* and the *members of the Church*.”<sup>26</sup> J.A. Quenstedt (1617-1688) observed, “Each part of the Church has its own duties in the calling of ministers: It is the part of ministers to examine the candidates for the ministry, to inquire into their learning and life, to ascertain and judge of the gifts necessary to the ministerial office, and to ordain them by the laying on of hands \*\* of the people to call, and by their votes and testimony to approve and elect.”<sup>26a</sup> So, too, D. Hollaz (1648-1713),

The right of calling ministers is in the power of the whole Church, and of all its parts and members. ... a distinction must be made between the right and the exercise of the right. ... the calling of ministers, taken in a general and comprehensive sence (as embracing election, ordination, and calling strictly speaking) should be so conducted by the whol Church, and all three estates, that due order may be preserved, and confusion avoided. ‘For God is not a God of confusion, but of order,’ 1 Cor. 14:33. And so to the Presbytery belong examination, ordination and inauguration: ... to the people, their consent, vote, and approval.<sup>26a</sup>

The view of the Fathers and the confessions, then, seems clear: when one speaks of the “entire Church,” one is speaking of the three estates. In light of this understanding, Walther’s statement,

“when the Smalcald Articles say the keys belong to the church or to the whole church, this does not mean that only entire congregations which have a pastor, possess the keys through him, as a whole [congregation], but even ‘two or three’, who are gathered in Jesus name, therefore in short, all true believing Christians,”<sup>27</sup> seems imprudent.

But this understanding of the three estates did not begin with Melancthon and the later Lutheran Fathers—it can be traced to Luther himself. The three estates are apparent in the relationships set forth in the table of duties in the Small Catechism: (1) pastors and hearers, (2) magistrates and subjects, and (3) the household estate. This division of estates certainly played a role in Luther’s understanding of the call process. As Luther declared in his lectures on Galatians (1535): “But when the prince or some other magistrate calls me, then, with firm confidence, I can boast against the devil and the enemies of the Gospel that I have been called by the command of God through the voice of a man; for the command of God comes through the mouth of the prince, and this is a genuine call.”<sup>28</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that some Missouri Synod authors have been critical of Luther’s views on this matter. The following example is drawn from Mundinger’s *Government in the Missouri Synod*:

...The first Diet of Speyer, 1526, expedited the control of the Church by the princes [sic] in that it gave each prince the right to arrange religious affairs according to his own desires. It is true, they were not forced to adopt a church polity in which the prince was the *summus episcopus*. They could have adopted constitutions in which the local congregations had much more to say. The fact that they did not must be attributed to Luther. The case of Hesse illustrates the point. Lambert of Avignon had drawn up a constitution for Hesse. In this constitution the local congregation is dominant. In fact, Luther’s principle of the priesthood of all believers receives full recognition [sic]. The congregation elects the pastor. There are regularly conducted synods, in

which pastors of local congregations discuss their problems and exchange experiences. ... Philip of Hesse, next to the Elector of Saxony perhaps the most prominent prince in the Protestant Church, was in favor of the constitution and voted thus. Why did Lambert's constitution fail? In January, 1527, Luther suggested to Philip that Lambert's scheme be given up. Philip listened to Luther, and a church polity with the prince as the *summus episcopus* was adopted in its place.<sup>29</sup> Mundingger bitterly adds: "The Great Commoner was not trusting commoners in 1527."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, for Luther had learned the lessons taught by Carlstadt, the Zwickau prophets and the Peasants' War.

### The Centrality of the Augsburg Confession to Lutheran Doctrine.

The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord reminds us that the Smalcald Articles were written as "an explanation of the... Augsburg Confession.... In them the doctrine of the Augsburg Confession is repeated, and some articles are stated at greater length from God's Word,..." (§7)<sup>31</sup> Despite Walther's zeal for the Smalcald Articles, we turn to the Augsburg Confession for our formative view of the relationship between the Office of the Keys, the Office of the Ministry, and the doctrine of the Church.

#### *The Structure of the Augsburg Confession.*

The ordering of the articles in the first part of the Augsburg Confession, "Chief Articles of Faith,"<sup>32</sup> should not be viewed as haphazard. For our purposes, we will break the first fourteen of these articles in two general groupings: (1) articles one through four, and (2) articles five through fourteen. In the first section, Article I defines Church teaching concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, Article II describes man's alienation from the Triune God, Article III tells us of the Son of God, who reconciled "the Father unto us"

(§2), and Article IV explains how the Church shares in this reconciliation through faith in Christ's propitiation for our sins.

The second section provides further details regarding how the Church shares in the benefits of Christ's propitiation through Word and Sacrament. Articles five and fourteen make it clear that this participation comes through the work of the Office of the Ministry: "That we may obtain this faith, the Office of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted (V.1); "Of Ecclesiastical Order, they teach, that no one should publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments, unless he be regularly called." (XIV)<sup>33</sup> Articles VI through XIII are all connected to the work of the Office. Good works spring from the faith which AC V tells us is obtained through the work of the Office (AC VI). Article VII tells us that the Church is located where "the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered"—activities only conducted by called ministers (AC XIV). Article VIII reassures believers that "the Sacraments and Word are effectual" (§ 2) means of grace even through the ministry of evil men. Again, Articles IX, X, and XI further explain Lutheran teaching regarding the means of grace administered by the Office. Article XII flows from Article XI, defining the repentance which precedes absolution and reassuring believers of the Church's authority to forgive sins ("the Church ought to impart absolution to those thus returning to repentance" [§ 2], "The Novatians also are condemned..." [§ 9]). Article XIII completes the teaching regarding the use of the Sacraments described in the preceding articles, followed by Article XIV which, as was observed above, clearly declares that the means of grace are only administered by those "regularly called" to the Office.

### *The Power of the Keys in the Augsburg Confession.*

The Augsburg Confession consistently directs the reader to the Office of the Ministry, not the "priesthood of all believers," for the

exercise of the power of the keys. Indeed, the Augsburg Confession only discusses the Office of the Keys in terms of the use of the keys by the Office of the Ministry:

Our people are taught that they should highly prize the absolution, as being the voice of God, and pronounced by His command. The power of the Keys is commended, and we show what great consolation it brings to anxious consciences... (XXV.3-4 Latin)

...the Pontiffs, emboldened by the power of the Keys... have also undertaken to transfer the kingdoms of this world,... (XXVIII.2 Latin)

But this is their [“our teachers”] opinion, that the power of the Keys, or the power of the bishops, according to the Gospel, is a power or commandment of God, to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer sacraments. (XXVIII.5 Latin)

Indeed, the German text goes on to declare, “This power of keys or of bishops is used and exercised only by teaching and preaching the Word of God and by administering the sacraments”—functions which are only to be performed through the Office. Again, “These things cannot come but by the ministry of the Word and the sacraments. ... Therefore, since the power of the Church grants eternal things, and is exercised only by the ministry of the Word...” (XXVIII.9, 10 Latin). The German text proclaims: “Inasmuch as the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal gifts and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching...” (XXVIII.10)

Several things can be concluded on the basis of this brief examination of the Augsburg Confession. First, while Walther locates the Church primarily in terms of invisible priests bearing the Office of the Keys, the Augsburg Confession deals primarily with a visible communion sharing in the means of grace administered by the pastor. Indeed, since we are told: (a) that the Church can be found

where the Gospel is rightly preached and the Sacraments rightly administered, and (b) that these functions (preaching and administering the Sacraments) are only performed through the Office of the Ministry, therefore we can conclude that, for the Augsburg Confession, the 'visible Church' is perceived in connection with the orthodox bishop. In essence, where the bishop is rightly carrying out his God-given work, there is the Church. Therefore the Augsburg Confession's teaching echoes the words of Ignatius of Antioch: "Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude [of the people] also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church."<sup>34</sup>

Second, while Walther assigns the Office of the Keys primarily to the invisible priesthood, the Augsburg Confession centers instead on the observation that the power of the keys is the power of the bishops; in fact, "Inasmuch as the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal gifts and is used and exercised *only* through the office of preaching..." (XXVIII.10 German. Emphasis added)—the power of keys/church/bishops is exercised only through the preaching office ("...allein durch das Predigtamt..."<sup>35</sup>). This does *not* contradict the Treatise's declaration that the keys are originally *given* to the entire Church. The point at issue in the Augsburg Confession is that the keys are used *through* the Office of the Ministry. Any emergency (lay) use of the keys means that one temporarily serves in the Office—otherwise the clear grammar ("Inasmuch as the power of the church or of bishops bestows eternal gifts and is used and exercised only through the office of preaching") of Article XXVIII must be considered gibberish.<sup>36</sup> As the Treatise says, "Just as in a case of necessity *even* a layman absolves, and *becomes* the minister and pastor of another;..." (§67) In such an emergency, there is no necessity for the usual testimony of ordination.



## Conclusion.

With these points in mind, we return to the statements from the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope which were cited above. Walther had challenged: “Let the papistic Lutherans show that a pastor has something different to do than every Christian is admonished in the Word of God to do, or let them confess that they themselves have no Christian church office.”<sup>37</sup> A dispassionate eye toward the Confessions, however, results in a different set of conclusions. For example, we turn again to one of Walther’s favorite passages on the doctrine of the Church in the Treatise:

And in John 20:23: “Whosoever sins ye remit,” etc. These words testify that the keys are given alike to all *the apostles*, and that all the apostles are alike sent forth.

In addition to this, it is necessary to confess that the keys pertain not to the person of a particular man, but to the Church, as many most clear and firm arguments testify. For Christ, speaking concerning the keys (Matt. 18:19), adds: “If two or three of you shall agree on earth,” etc. Therefore He ascribes the keys to the Church principally and immediately; just as also for this reason the Church has principally the right of calling. (§ 23-24. Italics added.)

Note, then, that the keys are not given to particular persons (individual priests), but to the Church. Furthermore, the point is stressed that the passage specifically references the fact that it is precisely the *apostles* (and, presumably, their theological successors—“the office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles,…” Tractate §10-German), and not the laity, who are given charge of the use, or administration, of the means of grace and the Office of the Keys. The amazing unity of many of the key teachers of our Church forbidding laymen to celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar<sup>38</sup> is ample testimony to the necessity of maintaining the confessional distinction between these two estates.

One such example of the understanding of the exercising of the Office of the Keys in the Age of Orthodoxy comes to us in Nicholas Hunnius' *Epitome Credendorum*. Hunnius served as superintendent of Eilenburg and as a professor at Wittenberg, only to go on to serve as pastor and superintendent at Lübeck. Hunnius' *Epitome Credendorum* (1625) is of particular significance because it "became very popular, also among the laity, as a brief and readable summary of the Christian faith."<sup>39</sup> This writer has not come across any evidence that Hunnius' views on the Office were challenged regarding their orthodoxy. Hunnius' work, therefore, is certainly not a bad place to start if we wish to see how theological questions were framed in the minds of his era.

Hunnius writes concerning the Office of the Ministry:

This office has been instituted in order that by it men might be made fit for eternal salvation. This is done

I. *by teaching.*

II. *by the dispensing of the sacraments, and*

III. *by church discipline. ...*

763. III. *Church discipline. ...* This power the minister derives partly from the *word of God*, Heb. 4, 12. ... and partly also:

764. From the exercise of the power of *the keys*, as the ministry of the word is called by the Lord Jesus Christ, Matth. 16, 29 [sic. vs. 19] ... Matth. 18, 18 ... John. 20, 22. 23.

...

[765.] Just as a shepherd leads his flock; the obedient among them he [the minister] is kind to; the disobedient he tries by gentle means to induce to a better course, and if he finds that they are not willing to improve, he removes them from his flock, yet without employing more dangerous and hurtful means.<sup>40</sup>

Hunnius' understanding of the Office of the Ministry reflects that of the confessors with regard to the Office of the Keys: the keys are *given* to the entire Church, but they are to be *used* by the

Office of the Ministry.<sup>41</sup> When the keys are publicly used by the laity, this means that they are assuming the Office of the Ministry on an emergency basis on that occasion—the regular use belongs “by divine law” (AC XXVIII.21) to those whom the Triune God has placed in the office. To the extent that Walther’s understanding of the Church de-emphasizes the means of the grace, the Office of the Ministry and the ‘visible’ Church, in order to center on the ‘invisible’ Church which possesses the power of the keys, his construction does not repeat the teaching of the Augsburg Confession in a helpful manner and it risks turning the wavering conscience of the believer away from the objective means of grace which Christ Jesus has established and, instead, directs the individual to look inward for proof he is, in fact, a priest. The efficacy of the means of grace may be construed to rest on the presence of believers (Thesis VII), thus setting up a tautology which may endanger faith: how do I know I’m a Christian? I faithfully participate in the means of grace. But how do I know they are effective means of grace? Because true believers are present and thus, “because of the true, invisible Church concealed in them, ... [visible Churches] possess the power which Christ has given to his entire Church.” (Thesis VII) There may be a danger of democratic Donatism when the efficacy of the sacraments is even *hinted* at as resting on the faith of believers, rather than on the power of Christ’s Institution.

*But let it be ever so much an external thing, here stand God’s Word and commandment which have instituted, established and confirmed baptism. But that God has instituted and commanded cannot be a vain, useless thing, but must be most precious, though in external appearance it be of less value than a straw. (LC IV.8)*

*For to be baptized in the name of God is to be baptized not by men, but by God Himself. Therefore, although it is performed by human hands, it is nevertheless God’s own work. (LC IV.10)*

*For even though a Jew should to-day come with evil purpose and wickedness, and we should baptize him in all good faith, we must say that his baptism is nevertheless genuine. For here is the water together with the Word of God, even*

though he does not receive it as he should, just as those who unworthily partake of the Lord's Supper receive the true sacrament, even though they do not believe. (LC IV.54)

—soli Deo gloria—

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Schmucker, for example, could blast “those foreigners in the west of our country, who constitute the Missouri Synod” for clinging to ancient rites such as private confession and absolution which had “long since been abandoned throughout our church in Europe, excepting in that small portion of German churches, known as Old Lutherans...” [in *American Lutheranism Vindicated*, (Baltimore: T. Newton Kurtz, 1856) p. 97.] Walther's friends have been just as strong in their praises, declaring Walther to be an “American Luther.”

<sup>2</sup> A conflation of parts of Thesis IV and Thesis I of Walther's Theses on the Church, contained in *Moving Frontiers*, ed. Carl S. Meyer, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964) p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> H.E. Jacobs' translation of the Book of Concord [*The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1911)] will be the primary version used in this paper. Tappert's translation will be utilized for those texts not included in the Jacobs edition (e.g. the German text of the Augsburg Confession).

<sup>4</sup> quoted from Stephan's Investiture (January 14, 1839), contained in *Moving Frontiers*, p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> Given space limitations, our examination will focus primarily on Walther's Theses. *Kirche und Amt*, published in 1852, was the product of a direct request by the 1850 synodical convention that Walther produce such a work. The Milwaukee convention of 1851 “resolved to publish the manuscript ‘in our name and as our unanimous confession’ [that of the Missouri Synod].” [C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. by J.T. Mueller, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987) p. 9]

<sup>6</sup> Lewis W. Spitz, Sr., *The Life of Dr. C.F. W. Walther*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> from *Moving Frontiers*, p. 164-165.

<sup>8</sup> In his elaboration of Thesis IV in *Kirche und Amt*, Walther does declare, “But if it [the Church] has this command [to preach the Gospel], then thereby it naturally also has the power, even the duty, to ordain ministers of the Gospel.” Furthermore, Thesis III of those “Concerning the Holy Ministry or the Pastoral Office” declares, “The ministry is not an arbitrary office but one whose establish-

ment has been commanded to the church and to which the church is ordinarily bound till the end of time.” (C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 52-53.)

<sup>9</sup> However, Walther does state in Thesis VIII that “...God gathers for Himself a holy Church of the elect in places where the Word of God is not preached in entire purity and the holy Sacraments are not administered altogether in accordance with their institution by Jesus Christ,—*provided the Word of God and the sacraments are not utterly denied but essentially remain in those places...*” (*Moving Frontiers*, p. 165. Italics added.)

<sup>10</sup> However, Thesis VIII.A could be read as saying faith is created through the means of grace since it says the Church is made manifest through them.

<sup>11</sup> “...the Lord gives to it [the Church] also without fail men who are especially equipped with the necessary gifts for the administration of the ministry, and so He offers them to the church for [its] service.” (C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, p. 53.)

<sup>12</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Congregation’s Right to Choose its Pastor*, trans. by Fred Kramer, (Ft. Wayne: The Office of Development, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987?) p. 25. [From *Der Lutheraner*, Nov. 13, 1860.]

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137. [From *Der Lutheraner*, June 25, 1861.] This view is carried over into the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Theology of the Missouri Synod* (1930): “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. Pau reminds all believers: “All things are yours,” 1 Cor. 3:21, 22, and Christ Himself commits to all believers the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Matt. 16:13-19, 18:17-20; John 20:22, 23, and commissions all believers to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments, Matt. 28:19, 20; 1 Cor. 11:23-25.” (§30)

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131. [From *Der Lutheraner*, June 11, 1861.]

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129. [From *Der Lutheraner*, June 11, 1861.]

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39. [From *Der Lutheraner*, November 27, 1860.]

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 23. [From *Der Lutheraner*, November 13, 1860.]

<sup>18</sup> “ganz, 1. *adj.* whole, entire, undivided, complete, intact, full, total. 2. *adv.* quite, wholly, altogether, entirely, thoroughly, all, perfectly, quite. ...” (Helmut W. Ziefle, *Dictionary of Modern Theological German*, [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992] 2nd ed., p. 98) From this definition, clearly the intent here is “The Church in its entirety,” not “all the component parts of the Church” (sic!)

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25. [From *Der Lutheraner*, November 13, 1860.]

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 137. [From *Der Lutheraner*, June 25, 1861.]

<sup>21</sup> ed. and trans. by Clyde L. Manschreck, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) p. 265.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments, An Enchiridion*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1981) p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Compend of Lutheran Theology*, trans. by H.E. Jacobs and G.F. Spieker, (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Book Store, 1868) p. 143. "9. *Quotuplex est vocatio ad Ministerium?* Duplex: Una immediata, qualis erat vocatio Prophetarum et Apostolorum, quae a DEO ipso sine medio facta est, et cum Prophetis et Apostolis desiit: Altera est Mediata, quae hodie fit per Ecclesiam, quae constat ex Magistratu, Ecclesiae ministris, et Auditoribus reliquis, quos vulgo plebem sive Laicos appellitant." *Compenium Locorum Theologicorum*, (Berlin: Verlag Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1961) p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> *Epitome credendorum*, trans. by Paul Edward Gottheil, (U.E. Sebal: Nuremberg, 1847) p. 241.

<sup>26a</sup> "A Question in Church Polity," *The Quarterly Review*, (Jan. 1876), p. 89-90, p. 91.

<sup>27</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Congregation's Right to Choose its Pastor*, trans. by Fred Kramer, (Ft. Wayne: The Office of Development, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987?) p. 25. [From *Der Lutheraner*, Nov. 13, 1860.]

<sup>28</sup> in *Luther's Works*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), vol. 26, 55 vols., p. 18.

<sup>29</sup> (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1947) p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Jacobs ed., p. 536.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs ed., p. 37.

<sup>33</sup> It should be remembered that Article XIV was received by the Roman Church with one understanding: "...that he is rightly called who is called in accordance with the form of law and the ecclesiastical ordinances and decrees hitherto observed everywhere in the Christian world.... Therefore in this sense the confession is received..." [Henry E. Jacobs, *The Book of Concord*, (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1908) vol. 2, 2 vols., p. 247.]

<sup>34</sup> Epistle of Ignatius to the Smyrnaeans, chapter VIII in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989) ed. by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1, p. 89-90.

<sup>35</sup> *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, (Berlin: Weigand und Grieben, 1874) p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Wilhelm Löhe observes in his explanation to Luther's Small Catechism: "He [Christ] gave the Keys to the whole Congregation, for all the members dwell in His house, and everything is theirs, Keys, Office of the Keys, and Bearers of the Keys, Paul, Apollos, Cephas, all are theirs; given to them for their salvation and blessing and peculiar possession. Yet not all to whom the Keys have been given for a blessing are to bear the Office of the Keys, but only the called stewards and servants of Christ. I Cor. iv. I." [*Questions and Answers to the Six Parts of the Small Catechism*

of *Dr. Martin Luther.*, trans. by Edward T. Horn, (Columbia, S.C.: W.J. Duffie, 1893) p. 156.]

<sup>37</sup> From *Der Lutheraner*, June 11, 1861, utilized in C.F.W. Walther, *The Congregation's Right to Choose its Pastor*, trans. by Fred Kramer, (Ft. Wayne: The Office of Development, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987?) p. 129.

<sup>38</sup> Johann Gerhard: "Es ist allhier ein Unterschied, denn die heilige Taufe ist das *sacramentum initiationis*, dadurch die Kinderlein werden Glieder Christi und Erben des ewigen Lebens, aber das heilige Abendmahl ist nicht ein so gar hochnöthiges Sacrament, daß man ohne dasselbe im Fall der Noth nicht könnte in Glauben zum ewigen Leben erhalten werden, sintemal die geistliche Nießung des Leibes und Blutes Christi, welche absolut zur Seligkeit nöthig, auch ohne die sacramentliche Nießung geschehen kann, dort aber bei den Kinderlein ist kein ander Mittel, dadurch wir sie zu Christo und zum ewigen Leben bringen mögen, als das Sacrament der heiligen Taufe." (*Ausführliche schriftmäßige Erklärung der beiden Artikel von der heiligen Taufe und dem heiligen Abendmahl*, [Berlin: Verlag von Gustav Schlawi, 1868] p. 22); N. Hunnius: "a. *To whom the dispensing of this Sacrament ought to be entrusted.* We answer that, as the Lord Jesus Christ has ordained His Apostles to be 'the stewards of the mysteries of God,' 1 Cor. 4:1, it is evident that the dispensing of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper forms part of the duty of the properly ordained ministers of the Church. And as, in the case of this Sacrament, no such cases of urgency can happen, as we have admitted sometimes to come to pass in the case of Baptism, no other persons, than such as are ordained ought to be permitted to administer the Lord's Supper. Nor do we anywhere find any command to this purpose, nor any instances of such a deviation from the rule ever having been permitted." (*Epitome credendorum*, p. 203)

<sup>39</sup> Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970) vol. 1, 2 vols., p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Nicolaus Hunnius, *Epitome Credendorum*, trans. by Paul Edward Gottheil, (Nuremberg: U.E. Sebald, 1847) p. 234-235.

<sup>42</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, the Missourian theory can lead to different conclusions regarding *praxis* than were held by the orthodox Fathers. Whereas Walther says that "...even Paul did not desire to excommunicate the incestuous person at Corinth without the congregation, but he wrote them that, though he himself regarded the sinner as deserving excommunication, the congregation itself ('when you are gathered together') should put away from among themselves that wicked person (1 Cor. 5:4, 13)," Hunnius understands this passage quite differently: "The most important [aim of excommunication] is that the stiffnecked might be inclined to come to a knowledge of his evil ways, and repent his sins. Such was the end Paul had in view when he excommunicated the Corinthian" (p. 237).