

**What Does the WELS Mean When It Says That the Public Ministry Is Divinely Instituted?**

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The detractors of the philosopher Socrates often compared him to a torpedo-fish. Such an evaluation was prompted by the fact that in debates Socrates would constantly question his opponent. This incessant questioning tended to bog down the discussion and in a sense paralyze the exchange. Socrates' battery of questions, however, was not designed simply to hinder dialogue. In reality, his questions addressed a very basic need in order to truly advance the conversation. Those questions were aimed at forcing the other debater to define his terms—to clarify what he was actually saying. Only when both parties have clearly defined their terms can each side understand what the other means and where they are each coming from. Unfortunately many people often forget this fundamental need in discussion. One current debate where terms have tended to get muddled is in the on-going discussion about church and ministry. In particular, an area where such confusion has resulted from a lack of defining the terms under debate is the divine institution of the public ministry. More specifically the focus could be narrowed to, “What does the WELS mean when it says that the public ministry is divinely instituted?”

Three specific portions of that statement need clarification in order to properly answer that question. The first is, “What is meant by the WELS?” The second is, “What is referred to with the term public ministry?” Finally, the third is, “What meaning is understood for divine institution?” Each of these points deserves some consideration because they will impact how the question they are a part of needs to be answered.

Of the three portions, the one that seems most easily answered is, “What is meant by the WELS?” The obvious answer is the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, specifically as it is represented in its official writings. However, this begs the question, “What writings are considered official?” For example, should Adolf Hoenecke's *Dogmatics* be considered? What

about the various papers published in the *WELS Ministry Compendium*? Should all of them be given equal standing? From what point in history should the WELS stance be taken? For the purposes of this paper, the WELS position will be defined as what is stated in official synodical publications (i.e. *This We Believe*, and the *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*) and items drawn from other publications that support that position. Other positions presented by WELS authors will also be noted.

The second question also does not demand a very lengthy treatment. While the term public ministry itself and its usages in various works, authors and languages is worthy of detailed examination, that is not within the sphere of this paper. Here it is sufficient to note that in reference to the major question under discussion, the term public ministry will refer to the exercise of preaching and teaching the word of God and administering the sacraments in a representative fashion on behalf of a group of Christians. In other words, this is the representative carrying out of all the functions of the gospel by a properly called servant of the church.

Now to the crux of the matter, “What is meant by the words divinely instituted?” Before one can understand what the WELS means by the divine institution of the public ministry, one first needs to clearly understand what it means that something is divinely instituted. The ambiguous word in that pair is institute. In the English language there are two common meanings for the word institute. The Oxford English Dictionary lists them in this fashion:

“1. *trans.* a. To set up, establish, found, ordain; to introduce, bring into use or practice. b. To ordain *that* something shall be, or something *to be*. *Obs.* c. To order, arrange, put into form, frame. *Obs.* d. To set in operation, set on foot, initiate, ‘start’ (a search, inquiry, comparison, etc.). 2. To establish in an office, charge, or position; to appoint; now, only to place in a spiritual charge.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. V, p. 353.

Since the second definition has to do with actually placing people into an office, and not the founding of the office itself, the first definition is what needs to be kept in mind when considering the divine institution of the public ministry. When modern English readers understand that word institute they have in mind the establishing of something. The word institute itself does not suggest much about how this founding or establishing takes place. It speaks more to the fact that something has been brought into use than how the thing has come into use.

In addition to considering the secular use of the word institute, one needs to consider the theological usage of that word within Lutheran circles. Lutherans have often used the word institute to refer to the establishment of quite a mixed bag of items. For example, Lutherans not only speak of the divine institution of Holy Communion and Baptism, but they also refer to things such as marriage and civil government as divinely instituted. Professor Joel Fredrich explains that this Lutheran usage has several dimensions to it. For instance, Lutherans typically point to the one event of Maundy Thursday for the divine institution of the Lord's Supper. However, when it comes to baptism Lutherans have pointed to several instances such as the Great Commission and Jesus' baptism.<sup>2</sup> A second dimension he points out is in whether the institution is "a matter of actions or of words."<sup>3</sup> He cites the Lord's Supper and marriage as examples where the institution is effected through a combination of words and actions, baptism as an example where the institution is based on words,<sup>4</sup> and civil government as an example of an institution based on actions.<sup>5</sup> The final dimension of Lutheran usage that Fredrich notes is the matter of whether a divine institution carries necessity. He explains this point by writing, "when

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<sup>2</sup> Fredrich, Joel, "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry," p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> When referring to baptism as established simply by words he refers to the Great Commission.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

we speak of divine institutions, we ordinarily are talking about things that we are not free to ignore, alter, or terminate. They may not be absolutely necessary for every individual, but God has instituted them to meet important, ongoing needs, and we cannot disregard his institutions in favor of our own contrary way of meeting those needs.”<sup>6</sup> While Fredrich details the necessity of each of the previously mentioned divine institutions one can understand his statement a little more clearly by simply looking at one of them. “Marriage is not absolutely necessary for all individuals, but it is necessary for those who are fit for marriage and lack the gift of continence.”<sup>7</sup> On the other hand people are not free to carpenter around with God’s institution of marriage and substitute extra-marital sexual relations or redefine marriage in ways contrary to God’s institution.<sup>8</sup>

This discussion of Lutheran usage is not meant to narrow our definition down to one specific meaning. Rather it is to recognize that Lutherans have used the term “divine institution” quite broadly. This is important to remember because otherwise one might simply think of the usage of the term in respect to only one of the items it is used for and try to force that particular understanding onto the usage of the term in reference to the ministry.

Now that the question has been defined a little more carefully, a more thorough study can begin concerning what the WELS means when it says in its official documents that the function of exercising the gospel ministry on behalf of others as a called representative is divinely established. Perhaps, to start with, the officially published WELS statements ought to be examined to see what they say exactly. In regard to the public ministry, *This We Believe* states:

8. We believe that God has also established the public ministry of the Word (Eph. 4:11), and it is the will of God that the church, in accordance with good order (1 Corinthians 14:40), call qualified individuals into this public ministry (1 Timothy

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 9:14). Such individuals minister publicly, that is, not because as individuals they possess the universal priesthood but because they are asked to do this in the name of fellow Christians (Romans 10:15). These individuals are the called servants of Christ and ministers of the gospel. They are not to be lords over God's church (1 Peter 5:3). We believe that when the church calls individuals into this public ministry, the Lord himself is acting through the church (Acts 20:28). We believe that the church has the freedom to establish various forms within the one ministry of the Word, such as pastors, Christian teachers, and staff ministers. Through its call, the church in Christian liberty designates the place and scope of service.<sup>9</sup>

In *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, the following Theses deal with the public ministry:

- D. *This public ministry* is not generically different from that of the *common* priesthood of all Christians. It constitutes a *special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel*.
1. All Christians are equal before God, neither superior nor inferior to one another, and all are equally entrusted with the same ministry of the Gospel. 1 Pe 2:9. Hence no one may assume the functions of the public ministry except through a legitimate call. Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 67-69: The authority to call (*ius vocandi*) is *implied* in the authority to administer the Gospel (*ius ministrandi evangelii*) given to the Church. Hence, it is proper to speak of the *derived* right of local congregations to call.
  2. God is a God of order; He wants us to conduct all of our affairs orderly (1 Co 14:33,40) and in the spirit of love (1 Co 16:14).
  3. Christians are not all equally qualified to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. The Lord sets forth the needed qualifications of those who are to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. 1 Ti 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-11. God gives to the Church men qualified for the various forms of the work required. Eph 4:7-16; Ro 12:6-8; 1 Co 12:4-11,28-31.
  4. These gifts should be gratefully received and developed. 1 Co 12:31; 1 Th 5:19,20; 1 Ti 4:14; 2 Ti 1:6-9.
  5. Thus these public ministers are appointed by God. Ac 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28. It would be wrong to trace the origin of this public ministry to mere expediency (Hoefling).
  6. There is, however, *no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry*. The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand. Ac 6:1-6. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Various functions are

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<sup>9</sup> *This We Believe*, p. 29-30.

mentioned in Scripture: 1 Ti 4:13; Eph 4:11; 1 Co 12:28; Ro 12:6-8; 2 Ti 2:2; Jn 21:15-17 (feeding); Ac 20:28 (watching); 1 Ti 3:2; 4:11; 6:2 (teaching); 1 Ti 3:5; 5:17 (ruling). In spite of the great diversity in the external forms of the ministerial work, the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the Gospel, not only those enumerated above, e.g., in Eph 4:11 and 1 Co 12:28, but also those developed in our day, are all gifts of the exalted Christ to His Church which the Church receives gratefully and with due regard for love and order employs under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the spiritual body of Christ; and all of them are comprehended under the general commission to preach the Gospel given to all believers.

Antithesis: We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (*Pfarramt*) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the difference in age of the two statements, one can quickly recognize the similarities. Both documents are quick to assert the divine institution of the public ministry. Both point to Ephesians 4:11 as the focal point for Scriptural support of this teaching. However, one can also quickly notice the greater length and depth of treatment in the theses from the *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*. This is due to the fact that these theses were drawn up in the 1950's to serve as part of a larger group of theses that would serve as the basis for discussion between the WELS and the LCMS in dealing with the doctrines of church and ministry. However, more pressing issues forced debate on these theses onto the back burner.

One significant item worth noting is the fact that in *This We Believe* the order of presentation stresses the divine institution of the public ministry as an independent fact. This independent fact is followed by the additional fact that "it is the will of God that the church, in accordance with good order (1 Corinthians 14:40), call qualified individuals into this public ministry."<sup>11</sup> At times the WELS has been accused of having a position that is the same as Hoefling. Hoefling taught that the public ministry was not divinely instituted but rather a human

<sup>10</sup> *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, p. 49-51.

<sup>11</sup> *This We Believe*, p. 29.

arrangement made for the sake of good order.<sup>12</sup> If one simply takes the order of the theses from the *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, the unfortunate impression can be given that the reason for calling the public ministry divinely instituted is the orderliness of God. While this arrangement may be less than ideal, the idea is nevertheless denied by the clear rejection of Hoefling's teaching and the positive assertion of the divine ordination of the public ministry before the six specific theses are dealt with.

Unfortunately, while both doctrinal statements very strongly assert the divine institution of the public ministry, neither is very generous on details of what is meant by this. The statement from *This We Believe* seems to bind the divine institution of the public ministry with the call in some sense. The theses expand upon this by adding that the divine institution also means that God lays down directives for the public ministry and gives men who meet those qualifications as gifts to the church. What is striking about all of this is the fact that nowhere is reference made to a specific command of God. The fact of the matter is that the WELS position from the time of the Wauwatosa theologians has not looked to legal commands of God to establish the public ministry.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Prange summarizes,

The Wauwatosa men didn't pay mere lip service to the power of the gospel and, therefore, never felt the need to resort to the legalistic idea of *mandata Dei*. They didn't depend upon legal regulations to guide the life of the Church. Instead, they trusted the gospel and its saving and guiding power in and for the life of the Church. With Luther they deeply trusted the Holy Spirit to work through the gospel and to lead Christians even in the creation of outward forms of gospel ministry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brug, John, "Current Debate Concerning the Doctrine of the Ministry," p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> As proof of this one needs only to do some basic reading in the writings of Pieper and Schaller. These thoughts can be clearly seen in articles such as Pieper's "Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and Its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline," and Schaller's "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry." Modern summaries of the thoughts of the Wauwatosa men can be found in Peter Prange's "Worship and Ministry: What of God and What of Men? A Study of the Augustana, Articles XII-XV, in Light of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians," and Joel Fredrich's "The Divine Institution of Gospel Ministry."

<sup>14</sup> Prange, "Worship and Ministry," p. 11. Incidentally, Pieper writes very strongly on Luther's concept of the public ministry in his article "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry." In that article Pieper makes the point that

In asserting this the Wauwatosa men were in fact departing from the earlier position of Adolf Hoenecke and the position held by Franz Pieper and others in the Missouri Synod. The position espoused by these two men, which later became known as the “Missouri” view of ministry, was that the pastoral office was a continuation of the apostolic office. Therefore the divine institution of the public, that is the pastoral, ministry is a consequence of the divine institution of the apostolic office. In contrast to this, the view held by the Wauwatosa men came to be known as the “Wisconsin” position. These labels are, however, quite debatable. After all, one could fully present the so-called “Wisconsin” view by quoting only LCMS theologians.<sup>15</sup>

Part of the reason for this is that the views actually have some strong similarities. For example, in understanding the term ministry they both recognize a wide and a narrow sense.

Pieper explains this well in his introductory remarks concerning the ministry in his dogmatics.

The term “ministry” is used both in Scripture and by the Church in a general, or wider, and in a special, or narrower, sense. In the wider sense it embraces every form of preaching the Gospel or administering the means of grace, whether by Christians in general, as originally entrusted with the means of grace and commissioned to apply them, or by chosen public servants (ministry ecclesiae) in the name and at the command of Christians. In this article we are speaking of the public ministry in the narrower sense, that is, of the office by which the means of grace, given originally to the Christians as their inalienable possession, are administered by order and on behalf of Christians.<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the two views really stems from a difference in how they understand the narrow sense of the of word ministry. Since Pieper includes public administration of the means of grace in the wider sense, the thing that sets his narrow use of ministry apart is the word “office.” Here office likely refers to position, otherwise one wonders what the difference

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Luther’s view was the complete opposite of Rome’s. Where Rome looked to commands of God and established laws for the New Testament church, Luther insisted on the freedom of the gospel.

<sup>15</sup> Brug, “Current Debate,” p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Pieper, Franz. *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 439.

between the wider and narrower uses are in his view. This is evident by the fact that his entire discussion is bounded by the pastoral office in a local congregation. The reason for this lengthy explanation is that because Pieper views the public ministry in terms of one particular office, his understanding of the institution of that office will clearly be colored by his definition. It is not surprising that Pieper and proponents of his view would look for a specific command, because that is what one would expect for the establishment of a specific position. Hoenecke does something similar in his dogmatics. He links the divine nature of the pastoral office to the apostolic office.<sup>17</sup>

Often it is argued that Walther also took this view of the public ministry. When one approaches Walther's statements on the ministry something that needs to be kept in mind is that Walther did not always clearly distinguish what he meant by the use of the word ministry. This stems from the fact that at times Walther used terms for the public ministry and the parish pastor almost interchangeably. Several reasons can be suggested for this. First of all, Walther's theses on church and ministry speak to a misunderstanding concerning the pastoral office. Second, at the time when Walther lived and worked, nearly every form of public ministry was exercised in connection with the parish pastorate.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps a third reason for this is the pattern set by Luther. Martin Luther often would refer to the parish pastoral office of his day as almost a shorthand for or concrete example of the public ministry.<sup>19</sup> These reasons rob much of the validity to the claims that Walther or even Luther taught the divine establishment of one particular form or position for the public ministry.

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<sup>17</sup> Hoenecke, Adolf, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. IV, p. 192-194.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrenz, Carl, "An Evaluation of Walther's Theses on the Church and Its Ministry," Lecture 5, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> In "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry" August Pieper spends some time discussing this usage in Luther's writings. Pieper deals with this topic specifically on pages 258f., when he addresses the fact that many people call upon Luther for support of their position that the local pastorate is divinely instituted. Carl Lawrenz gives evidence of the fact that Walther wrote in a similar fashion as he continues his discussion of Walther's second thesis on the ministry.

While this discussion might appear to be rather far afield from the matter at hand, the contrast with the WELS position helps to clarify what that position is. When the WELS speaks of a divine institution for the public ministry it is not referring to a specific command of institution. It also does not mean that the WELS looks to the divine institution of one particular form as the basis for the divine institution of other forms or one later form in particular. The above excursion also illustrates that this view held by the Wisconsin Synod is not at variance with the teaching of Lutheran theologians of the past.

As noted earlier, the WELS teaches that the divine institution of the public ministry is based upon the call, qualifications, and supply of public ministers to the church. To a lesser extent it also recognizes good order as a supporting reason. One searches the Scriptures in vain for a command from Christ to establish elders by congregation. However, throughout his ministry Paul is seen involved in doing that very thing, placing leaders over congregations (Ac 14:23, 2 Ti 2:2, Tit 1:5). Yet these congregation leaders are referred to as set into their positions by the Holy Spirit, without reference or regard to human involvement (Ac 20:28). In light of the “Missouri” position, it is especially important to note that not even the apostolic involvement is mentioned as the basis for the divine nature of the calls issued to the Ephesian elders.

As Scriptural support for the divine qualifications for the public ministry, the WELS cites 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-11. In essence these qualifications could be summarized by the abbreviated phrase, “reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Ti 2:2). The longer lists of characteristics for such reliable and qualified men are nothing other than an enumeration of the characteristics God wants all Christians to have. Obviously, since these men are leaders in the church, they are to serve as examples for the believers. So it is fitting that God would expect them to be models of Christian life and doctrine.

In keeping with the nature of God's grace, he does not leave man on his own to meet these requirements. No, in his gracious mercy God gives men with the abilities to function in such positions as gifts to his church. The WELS rightly points to Ephesians 4:7-16 as proof of the fact that the public ministers God gives to the church are indeed gifts from the very head of the church—Christ himself. Scripture does not make this point only in Ephesians. Passages such as Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-11,28-31 also make this same point.

Finally, the matter of order needs to be addressed one last time. Though order in the church alone is not the reason why the public ministry was established, it can properly be understood to be a component in such an institution. After all, Paul's appeal to order among the Corinthians (14:33,40) is not simply phrased in human terms. Rather it appeals to the fact that God wishes peace and order to reign in his church. Lutherans for centuries have included order among the issues involved in the divine institution of the public ministry.<sup>20</sup> Just because Hoefling incorrectly taught that it is for the sake of human order that the public ministry was instituted does not mean that divine peace and order should be entirely ruled out of the discussion. One must be careful, however, to keep this consideration in its proper place.

Perhaps a brief restatement of the preceding Scriptural proof will help to clarify what the WELS means in calling the public ministry divinely instituted. God has set the qualifications, provided the candidates and placed them into his service by the working of the Holy Spirit, with one of the results being God-pleasing peace and order in the church. Despite the fact that this occurred without a divine command, the function of public ministry is something God has established by providing to his church and working through his church. The oft-quoted phrase of Walther, "By Christ, through the church" is an accurate description for this arrangement.

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<sup>20</sup> Luther is quoted and extensively referenced by Pieper as making this argument in "Luther's Doctrine of Church and Ministry" on page 255. Among more modern Lutherans who espoused this view one could list August Pieper, and John Schaller.

In light of the earlier examination of the differences between the “Missouri” and “Wisconsin” views on the public ministry, a few observations should be noted. In the passages listed above different positions or titles are used. However, in each of these passages these different positions are all spoken of in terms of God’s involvement in them. Apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, deacons, elders, and overseers are just some of the positions mentioned that are all described as having God involved in one or more aspects of their functioning in the church. Certainly each of these positions is distinct from the others.<sup>21</sup> However, the one thread of similarity that runs through all of them is the fact that they all performed the same function to differing degrees. To some degree or another each of those positions existed to preach and teach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and exercise the use of the keys for the sake of the church. In other words, all of them existed to serve as public ministers.

How does this understanding of the divine institution for the public ministry measure up to standard English and Lutheran usage? Recall that the English word “institute” does not speak to the how, but rather simply to the fact that something is established or ordained. The WELS understanding lines up pretty well with such a definition. By focusing more on the fact that God has established the public ministry, the WELS not only follows English usage, but avoids trying to speak where God has not specifically revealed. When it comes to the matter of Lutheran usage, three dimensions were noted as to the use of that term divine institution. As far as the first dimension of how many institutions a thing can have, the ministry would seem to be more akin to baptism, since it does not have a single defining act by which it was brought into existence. In the dimension of whether it was established by words or actions, we would have to liken it more to civil government. The ministry was more established by God acting through the

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<sup>21</sup> Note that there is an exception to that statement. From New Testament usage it does appear that elders and overseers were interchangeable names for the same position.

church than by simply commanding the church. However, after the fact, God pulled back the curtain, so to speak, and revealed that he was indeed the one acting through his church. Finally, there is the dimension of necessity. As long as the church exists, there will be a need for “reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Ti 2:2). It is not necessary that every member of the church fit that description. Nor does the specific form of the position those men fill need to be the same everywhere. But God himself will supply such men to his church. The most common analogy used in the WELS is to compare the institution of the public ministry to the institution of civil government. God does not prescribe any specific form for government, but whatever form the government does take Lutherans have maintained that it is still established by God. Using the same understanding when it comes to the ministry is completely in accord with Lutheran usage of the term divine institution.

In summary, what does the WELS mean when it says that the public ministry is divinely instituted? On the basis of Scripture and in accord with the historic understanding of Lutheranism, the WELS understands this divine institution in the following manner. God wills that the church have individuals qualified to teach. Christ provides those to fill this function as gifts to his church. Through the church the Holy Spirit works to place those individuals as servants working on behalf of the people of God. All of this is carried out according to God’s order and arrangement with the result that peace may reign in his church.

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