

AN EXERCISE IN PARSING:

A Small Contribution to the Ongoing Discussion concerning the ELS Ministry Statement

I. Introduction

One of the main difficulties in the controversy over the doctrine of the Public Ministry currently underway in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod is that different people seem to be reading the adopted document on “The Public Ministry of the Word” (PMW) in different ways, and are construing it to say different things. This is problematic on many levels. It is not really possible for people to be sure if they agree with the teachings of the document if they are not sure what those teachings actually are. In the midst of this confusion, there may be some who think that they disagree with the document, even though their beliefs are actually in harmony with what the document says. There may be others who think that they agree with the document, even though their beliefs are not in harmony with what the document says. The present paper is a modest attempt to work toward overcoming some of the misunderstandings of what the PMW document says. To the best of our ability we will try not to read meaning into the document, or add thoughts and ideas that are not actually in the text itself. Instead, on the basis of the structure and flow of the document, and in view of the basic norms of English lexicology and grammar, we will attempt to carry out a very careful exegesis of the document. Since the essayist was not a member of the committee that drafted the document, he may perhaps be protected from the temptation to read it according to what its authors were *trying* to say, and be able to concentrate more objectively on what its authors did in fact say.

At the present time we will not analyze the entire document in this way, but will concentrate our efforts on one particular portion of it. If we are successful in identifying or establishing an understanding of this portion of the text that is acceptable to all or most of the pastors in the synod, then in time it should be possible, by using the same means and methods, also to come to a common understanding of what other controverted parts of the document actually say. The portion of the document on which we will focus our attention in this essay, from the beginning of section II of “The Public Ministry of the Word,” reads as follows:

This public use of the keys is the Public Ministry of the Word. “That we may obtain this faith, the office of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (AC V). This divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word includes both a narrower and a wider sense. The narrower sense refers to a presiding office that is indispensable for the church; see II A. The wider sense refers, in addition to a presiding office, to offices having a limited public use of the keys, offices that the church, in her freedom, may establish; see II B. The divine institution of this preaching and teaching office is not located in just one particular passage. Rather, throughout the New Testament, a divine ordering, establishment, and institution of the preaching and teaching office is indicated and presupposed (John 20:21-23, John 21:15ff, Matthew 28:18-20 [NKJV], Matthew 9:36-38, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 4:1; see also Treatise 10).

Let’s parse this.

II. “This public use of the keys is the Public Ministry of the Word.”

According to the PMW document, the “Public Ministry of the Word” is synonymous with the “public use of the keys.” There is, therefore, a dynamic quality to the way in which the phrase “Public Ministry of

the Word” is used here. The “Public Ministry of the Word” is something that is active, and not static. It is a “use” of God’s Word in law and Gospel. But it is also an *official* activity, or an *official* use. The document is not talking here about an assortment of vocationally disconnected or free-floating religious functions. Section I of the PMW document had said that when the keys are being used “publicly,” they are thereby being used “officially.” A *public* use of the keys is accordingly an *official* use of the keys. This “use” or “ministry” is by definition a sacred activity that is (or should be) exercised from within an office, or on the basis of official authorization, and not privately or on the basis of an individual’s personal initiative.

III. “That we may obtain this faith, the office of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted’ (AC V).”

This is a quotation from the Augsburg Confession, based, it would seem, on the Latin form of the original. We do note, however, that where the original Latin of the Augustana has “*ministerium*,” the translation that is used here has “office.” Usually the Latin word “*ministerium*” is rendered in English as “ministry,” and the English word “office” is reserved for those times when the term “*officium*” appears in a Latin text. The English translation of this section of the Augsburg Confession that appears here may reflect somewhat of a conflation of the original Latin version and of the original German version, since the German Augsburg Confession *does* speak in this place of the divine institution of the “*Predigtamt*,” that is, the preaching *office*. “*Predigtamt*” is, of course, a compound word, including within it the German term “*Amt*,” which is usually rendered in English as “office.”

The meaning of the German word “*Amt*” is essentially synonymous with the meaning of the Latin word “*officium*.” The shared meaning of these terms is also essentially the same as the meaning of the English word “office.” It is often assumed, especially among English-speaking Lutherans, that when the term “office” appears in a Confessional or dogmatic text, it is referring to a specific position of responsibility or station in life. But this is not always the case – neither in regard to the meaning of the English term, nor in regard to the meaning of the German and Latin terms that stand behind it. The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* (www.m-w.com) indicates that the English word “office” can mean “a special duty, charge, or position conferred...for a public purpose: a position of authority to exercise a public function”; “a position of responsibility or some degree of executive authority”; “something that one ought to do or must do”; “an assigned or assumed duty, task, or role”; “the proper or customary action of something: function”; or “something done for another: service.” In commenting on the meaning of Article XIV of the Augsburg Confession, Robert D. Preus writes in his monograph on “The Doctrine of the Call” that “The call in AC XIV is to both office (*status, officium, Amt*) and function (*officium, munus, opus, Amt*)” (*Church and Ministry Today* [Saint Louis: The Luther Academy, 2001], p. 20). We note that the Latin word *officium* and the German word *Amt* appear in both of Preus’s definitions. Sometimes these words refer to a position of responsibility that is authorized to carry out a certain duty or bundle of interrelated duties, and sometimes they refer to the authorized duty or duties that are carried out.

We can see an example of this fluidity of meaning in the Smalcald Articles, where the term “*Amt*” is used in two different ways *in the same paragraph*. Luther writes:

If the bishops wanted to be true bishops and to attend to the church and the gospel, then a person might – for the sake of love and unity but not out of necessity – give them leave to ordain and confirm us and our preachers, provided all the pretense and fraud of unchristian ceremony and pomp were set aside. However, they are not now and do not want to be true bishops. Rather, they are political lords and princes who do not want to preach, teach, baptize, commune, or perform any proper work or office [*Amt*] of the church. In addition, they persecute and condemn those who do take up a call to such an office [*Amt*]. Despite this, the church must not remain without servants on their account. Therefore, as the ancient examples of the church and the Fathers teach us, we should

and will ordain suitable persons to this office [*Amt*] ourselves. (SA III, X:1-3, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000], pp. 323-24).

When Luther speaks of “any proper work or *office* of the church,” he means a specific duty or function. When he says that “we should and will ordain suitable persons to this *office*,” he means the distinct position of responsibility of “preacher” or pastor. And when he speaks of those who “take up a call to such an office,” he could have either meaning, or both meanings, in mind. When the word “office” is used in Lutheran theological writing, it does not, therefore, always mean exactly the same thing. The meaning in each instance needs to be determined by the context.

In the PMW document, the quotation from the Augsburg Confession is sandwiched between a sentence which states that the “public use of the keys” is equivalent to the “Public Ministry of the Word,” and a sentence which states that this “Public Ministry of the Word” is “divinely instituted.” The PMW document is therefore using this quotation to accentuate two important points about the “public use of the keys”: that the public use of the keys is an “office” which involves the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments; and that the public use of the keys is instituted by God. This theme, and this terminology, are taken up a few lines later, where the PMW document goes on to say that “The divine institution of this preaching and teaching office is not located in just one particular passage.” The phrase “this preaching and teaching office” hearkens back to the phrase “the office of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments,” which in turn hearkens back to the phrase “the Public Ministry of the Word,” which in turn hearkens back to the phrase “the public use of the keys.” Contextually, all of these phrases are being used to describe the same thing.

Since the PMW document teaches that the public use of the keys, or the Public Ministry of the Word, is *instituted* by God, it will also be useful for us to have a clear understanding of what the word “institute” means. The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines this term as “to establish in a position or office”; “to originate and get established: organize”; and “to set going: inaugurate.” So, according to the PMW document, God himself is the one who established, originated, organized, set going, and inaugurated the public use of the keys, that is, the Public Ministry of the Word.

IV. “This divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word includes both a narrower and a wider sense.”

The “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” (that is, the divinely instituted public use of the keys) is said here to include a “narrower sense” and a “wider sense.” The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* gives the following definition for the word “sense”: “a meaning conveyed or intended: import, signification; especially: one of a set of meanings a word or phrase may bear.” Since the word “sense” means “meaning,” what is being said here is that the *phrase* “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” includes, in the church’s usage and vocabulary, two different meanings, each of which is true and valid according to its intended referent. The word “sense” does *not* mean “component” or “part.” So, when the PMW document speaks of a “narrower sense” and of a “wider sense,” it is talking about two ways of using and understanding a particular set of *terms*, and not about two *components* or *parts* of something. The “narrower” sense of the “Public Ministry of the Word” is more specific and less inclusive in its definition and application, and pertains to the work of a narrower range of “ministers” or ecclesiastical office-holders. The “wider” sense of the “Public Ministry of the Word” is less specific and more inclusive in its definition and application, and pertains to the work of a wider range of “ministers” or ecclesiastical office-holders.

V. “The narrower sense refers to a presiding office that is indispensable for the church;

see II A. The wider sense refers, in addition to a presiding office, to offices having a limited public use of the keys, offices that the church, in her freedom, may establish; see II B.”

We note, first, that the PMW document is now employing the word “office” to mean a distinct position of responsibility, and not just to mean a duty, or bundle of interrelated duties, that would be carried out from within a distinct position of responsibility. In its use of the plural form of the word – speaking of various “offices” that the church in her freedom may (or may not) establish – the document is obviously not speaking here directly or specifically of the unitary “office” of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments that God himself established for the church of all times and places. This unitary “office,” as a bundle of interrelated public duties, has indeed been instituted by God, and it remains a divine institution regardless of how, where, by whom, or to whatever extent it is vocationally implemented. But it does not follow from this that all the various positions of responsibility that participate in carrying out the duties of this unitary “office” are, or need to be, directly instituted by God.

In regard to the “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” in its narrower sense, the PMW document says that this sense or meaning *refers to* “a presiding office that is indispensable for the church.” According to the elaborations that are made in section II A of the document, the indispensability of such a “presiding office” is grounded in the fact that “The church is commanded to appoint ministers who will preside over the churches (2 Timothy 2:2, Titus 1:5, Ap XIII, 12), who must have the scriptural qualifications for a full use of the keys.” In regard to the “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” in its wider sense, the PMW document says that this sense or meaning *refers to* any and all ecclesiastical offices that involve a public use of the keys: the aforementioned “presiding office” with its “full [public] use of the keys,” as well as other offices that have only “a limited public use of the keys.”

According to the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, the word “refer” means “to have relation or connection: relates”; and “to direct attention usually by clear and specific mention.” In using the phrase “refers to” in these places, the PMW document is therefore saying that the *narrower sense* of the “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” has relation or connection with, or relates or directs attention to, an office that requires competency for a full public use of the keys; and it is saying that the *wider sense* of the “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” has relation or connection with, or relates or directs attention to, any and all offices that involve the public use of the keys.

We recall that the PMW document recognizes a direct correspondence between the “Public Ministry of the Word” and the “public use of the keys.” According to the way in which these two phrases are used and defined in the document, they mean the same thing. Again, to quote the document directly, the “public use of the keys *is* the Public Ministry of the Word.” Therefore, when the document says that the “Public Ministry of the Word” in the narrower sense “refers to” a presiding office, we would understand this “reference” to be focused primarily on *the public use of the keys* that is carried out – to the “full” degree – from within such an office. When the document says that the “Public Ministry of the Word” in the wider sense “refers to” a broader array of ecclesiastical offices, we would understand this “reference” likewise to be focused primarily on *the public use of the keys* that is carried out – either to the “full” degree or to a “limited” degree – from within these offices. The Public Ministry of the Word (in both senses) “refers to” these various offices also because the public use of the keys is, by definition, an *official* use of the keys. An “official” use of the keys always requires an “office,” and is always carried out from within an “office.”

God permits, approves, blesses, and works through those external vocational arrangements that are made in an orderly way for the purpose of carrying out public activities that he wants to be carried out. But this does not mean that God has directly *instituted* all such external vocational arrangements. In fact, he has not. The PMW document acknowledges this when it says that those offices which have only “a limited public use of the keys” exist as distinct positions of responsibility – if and when they do exist – because of the

church's sanctified judgment, and not because of a divine command. If God has directly instituted something for the church, this would mean that the church cannot ordinarily do without it, and that the church would in fact be sinning against God's will if it declined to have that divinely instituted thing. According to God's will and institution, the church cannot do without the public use of the keys. More specifically, the church cannot do without the *full* public use of the keys. But the church often *can* do without specific external offices of one kind or another that are set up for the purpose of carrying out only a *limited* public use of the keys, or only a *limited part* of the Public Ministry of the Word. Such positions of responsibility are not commanded for the church of all times and places, and they are therefore not indispensable for the church of all times and places.

By comparison, the PMW document recognizes "a presiding office" to be "indispensable for the church." In section II A, this "presiding office" is equated with "the pastoral office in its various manifestations." In expanding in that section on the significance of "the pastoral office in its various manifestations," The PMW document quotes as follows from the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope:

"The Gospel requires of those who preside over the churches that they preach the Gospel, remit sins, administer the sacraments, and, in addition, exercise jurisdiction, that is, excommunicate those who are guilty of notorious crimes and absolve those who repent... [T]his power belongs by divine right to all who preside over the churches, whether they are called pastors, presbyters or bishops" (Treatise 60-61).

The PMW text then goes on to say in its own words that

God commands that properly called men publicly preach, teach, administer the sacraments, forgive and retain sins, and have oversight of doctrine in the name of Christ and the church (1 Timothy 2:11-12). Therefore a presiding office, whether it is called that of pastor, shepherd, bishop, presbyter, elder or by any other name, is indispensable for the church (Luke 10:16, 1 Corinthians 12:27-31, Matthew 28:18-20, Hebrews 13:17, Acts 20:28, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 5:1-2).

The existence of the "limited" offices, as distinct offices, is a matter of ecclesiastical freedom. But the pastoral office (in its various manifestations) exists because of a divine *command*. God "commands" that the church appoint qualified men to exercise the authority and duties of spiritual oversight that belong "by divine right" to those who serve in this office. This is why a presiding office is uniquely "indispensable for the church."

Section II B of the PMW document is an elaboration on, and an explanation of, the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its wider sense. The focus and purpose of this section must be kept in mind when we consider the meaning of antitheses 8 and 9, which appear within it, and which can be a source of some confusion if they are not interpreted and applied according to their context. These antitheses state that "We reject the teaching that only those qualified to carry out a full use of the keys are in the Public Ministry," and that "We reject the teaching that the Public Ministry is limited to any one divinely fixed form, that is, limited to the pastoral office to the exclusion of other teachers of the Word." Understood contextually, these statements are simply reaffirming that there is indeed a legitimate "wider sense" of the phrase "Public Ministry," which refers to the public use of the keys as carried out to any degree or level, from within any and all ecclesiastical offices. These statements should certainly not be understood as repudiations of the teaching that appears in section II A of the document: that the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its *narrower* sense *does* in fact refer exclusively to "the exercise of spiritual oversight" that is carried out (by divine design) only from within "the pastoral office"; and that the "Public Ministry of the Word" in its *narrower* sense *does* in fact require competency for a *full* public use of the keys.

Are pastors serving in the “Public Ministry of the Word?” They are, according to both the wider sense of the phrase and the narrower sense of the phrase. Are parochial school teachers serving in the “Public Ministry of the Word?” According to the wider sense of the phrase, they are. According to the narrower sense of the phrase, they are not.

VI. “The divine institution of this preaching and teaching office is not located in just one particular passage. Rather, throughout the New Testament, a divine ordering, establishment, and institution of the preaching and teaching office is indicated and presupposed (John 20:21-23, John 21:15ff, Matthew 28:18-20 [NKJV], Matthew 9:36-38, Ephesians 4:11-12, 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 4:1; see also Treatise 10).”

The PMW document is here going back to its previous usage of the word “office,” according to which the “preaching and teaching office” is synonymous with the “office of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments,” which is synonymous with the “Public Ministry of the Word,” which is synonymous with the “public use of the keys.” Most of the passages of Scripture that are cited here describe either the Lord’s commissioning and sending out of the apostles, or the ministry of those apostles and their ministerial colleagues in the later life of the church. The reference to Treatise 10 (no doubt with the German version in mind) is also significant.

In an essay that was delivered at an ELS Teachers’ Convention several years ago, Gaylin R. Schmeling gives expression to a standard Lutheran understanding of the relationship between the extraordinary apostolate and the ordinary public ministry when he writes that

The Office of the Public Ministry is grounded in the ministry of Christ and is an extension of the apostolate established by Him. Christ, the Suffering Servant, the God-man, not only proclaimed God’s love but completely satisfied the demands of God’s Law by living a holy life in our place and by dying a sacrificial death on the cross for our sins. His redemptive work is the content and power of the ministry of the church. Christ accomplished salvation for all on the cross, and He also provided the means of grace and the ministry of Word and Sacrament to impart to us that great treasure. He sent out the apostles to distribute that treasure and continues to do the same today through the Public Ministry. The Public Ministry is a continuation of the apostolate and is contained in it. Our Confessions state, “The office of the ministry proceeds from the general call of the apostles” (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 10, *Triglotta*, p. 507). The Public Ministry is not essentially different from the apostolate, for in both one is called and sent by Christ as His representative. Obviously, those in the Public Ministry today are called mediately and not immediately as the apostles. Yet it is the same divine call of Christ. (“The Office of the Public Ministry,” p. 1)

The PMW document defines and uses the term “pastoral office” as “referring to all those men who are called to a ministry of pastoral oversight in local congregations, as well as in other specialized fields of labor” (footnote 2). According to this “less restrictive meaning,” therefore, we can say that the apostolate was a unique and extraordinary manifestation of the “pastoral office.” In 1 Peter 5:1-4, where the apostle is exhorting the elders of the church to be faithful shepherds of God’s flock, he describes himself as “a fellow elder,” thereby coordinating his ministry of pastoral oversight with theirs. The Augsburg Confession also describes the authority and essential duties of the apostles in distinctly episcopal or pastoral terms when it states that,

according to the gospel, the power of the keys or the power of the bishops is the power of God’s mandate to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For Christ

sent out the apostles with this command [John 20:21-23]: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you. ... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” And Mark 16[:15]: “Go...and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. ...” This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the gospel and by administering the sacraments either to many or to individuals, depending on one’s calling. (Augsburg Confession XXVIII:5-8 [Latin], Kolb/Wengert p. 93)

But let’s not forget that the “divinely instituted Public Ministry of the Word” – which is synonymous with the “divinely instituted preaching and teaching office” – includes *two senses* or meanings. From the perspective of the *narrower* sense of the phrase, we can say that when Jesus trained and sent the apostles, and entrusted to them the full public ministry of Word and sacrament, he was thereby inaugurating in and for the Christian church the *full public use* of the keys. This continues to be a defining trait of the Public Ministry of the Word in the narrower sense. Whenever the full public use of the keys is being exercised in an orderly and proper way, this is an example of the Public Ministry of the Word in the narrower sense – and of “the pastoral office,” from which, according to God’s command, the full public use of the keys is carried out. From the perspective of the *wider* sense of the phrase, we can say that when Jesus trained and sent the apostles, and entrusted to them the full public ministry of Word and sacrament, he was thereby inaugurating in and for the Christian church the *public use* of the keys. This continues to be a defining trait of the Public Ministry of the Word in the wider sense. Whenever the public use of the keys is being exercised in an orderly and proper way – either to the full extent by pastors, or to a limited extent by other ecclesiastical office-holders – this is an example of the Public Ministry of the Word in the wider sense.

The full public use of the keys includes within it, at least potentially, any and every limited public use of the keys. There is no divine institution of a limited public use of the keys *per se*. There *is* a divine institution of the public use of the keys, as a whole and in all of its parts, from which, in the church’s freedom, limited public uses can be vocationally extracted and entrusted to qualified individuals, according to the church’s needs and circumstances. Section II B of the PMW document explains that when the church in this way calls individuals to fill positions of responsibility involving only a limited public use of the keys, it is thereby separating, “by human right,” a “limited portion of the office” to such individuals, and is authorizing them to exercise or carry out only a “specific” and “limited part of the Public Ministry of the Word.”

VII. Conclusion

In summary, the PMW document teaches that the “public use of the keys” has its basis in a *divine institution*; and that the “pastoral office” – which exists for the purpose of carrying out the *full* public use of the keys – has its basis in a *divine command*. It is almost certain that no ELS pastor is accustomed to speaking of the doctrine of the Public Ministry of the Word with exactly the same terminology and nomenclature that are used in the PMW document. For each of us, there are elements of this document that seem new and unfamiliar, and that we might therefore be a bit hesitant to endorse. There are also elements of this document with which we are each more comfortable, and which resonate more naturally with what we are used to thinking and saying. But different pastors will feel differently about different parts of the document. What is readily embraced as sound and certain by some may be judged by others to be questionable and unclear, and vice versa. In our fraternal discussions and deliberations about these matters, it would, therefore, be wise for us to remember the sage words of John P. Meyer:

Those are in fundamental agreement who, without any reservation, submit to the Word of God. When the Word of God has spoken in any matter, that matter is settled. There may be things that some men have not yet found in their study of the Bible; there may be matters with reference to which they have accustomed themselves to an inadequate mode of expression; yet, no matter what

their deficiency may be, they are determined to accept the Bible doctrine. Where such is the case, there is fundamental agreement. ... A fundamental agreement is all the church can ever hope to attain here on earth. We are not all equally gifted; one has a much clearer and a much more comprehensive insight into God's doctrines than another. We all strive to grow daily in understanding. Besides, when once we have accustomed ourselves to a faulty or an inadequate expression, it is not only difficult to unlearn the particular phrase and to acquire a proper one, but the inadequate term may tend also to warp our views on other points. Yet, in spite of all such differences, where there is an unconditional willingness to hear what God has to say in his Word, there is fundamental agreement. ("Unionism," *Essays on Church Fellowship* [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996], pp. 63-64)

*"Know this, my beloved brothers:
let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger..."*
(James 1:19, ESV)

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