

# Spiritual Fathers

*A Treatise on the Lutheran Doctrine of the Ministry,  
with Special Reference to Luther's Large Catechism*

David Jay Webber



Klotsche-Little Publishing  
Phoenix, Arizona  
2013

To Paul, Ruth †, and John

*... I bow my knees before the Father,  
from whom every fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named,  
that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory,  
to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being,  
that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...  
(Ephesians 3:14b-17a)*

Copyright © 2013 by David Jay Webber. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in scholarly writings, critical publications, or book reviews, none of the original material in this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the author or publisher.

Scripture quotations marked “ESV” are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version ®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Klotsche-Little Publishing  
4837 East Melinda Lane  
Phoenix, AZ 85054

ISBN 978-0-9894568-0-7



## *Table of Contents*

Foreword .....	4
1. "The Lutheran Confessions...clarify...what the Bible teaches about...church and ministry" .....	7
2. "There are also spiritual fathers" .....	13
3. "Preaching is entrusted to the man and not to the woman" ...	17
4. "The apostles, prophets, and patriarchs" .....	33
5. "A ministerial succession unbroken in the church" .....	48
6. "It is wicked to interpret a poor choice of words as error" .....	63
7. "Limited to the pastorate of a local congregation?" .....	69
8. "Teaching...to which every church member has access and which is meant for all" .....	90
9. "The order yields to the need...in an emergency" .....	96
10. "The Sacraments are to be distributed through a common public office" .....	101
11. "Rightfully did he come forth, the man whom the entire church elected" .....	109
12. "Ordination...certainly is necessary" .....	120
13. "They offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments...in the stead and place of Christ" .....	130
14. "The ministry strictly speaking, and the ministry in a wider sense" .....	136

15. "The deacons are...a part of the officials of the church, taking a share in the ministry" .....	141
16. "A chaplain, schoolmaster, or other minister of the church" ..	150
17. "The sextons...teach the children the catechism and Christian hymns" .....	154
18. "A skilled woman...as schoolmistress should instruct the daughters" .....	160
19. "A school teacher...honors and obeys God when he carries out and testifies to his call" .....	165
20. "If the difference is only a matter of terminology..., the difference should be tolerated" .....	171
Excursus: "The keys are...given to the church" .....	177
Endnotes .....	192



## *Foreword*

Imagine a scenario like this: The dreaded red and blue lights flash in your rearview mirror, as you pull over to the side of the road. You roll down your window and dutifully place both hands on the steering wheel, as the officer approaches your vehicle. The officer is wearing khaki shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. He is munching on a donut. "Howdy!" he says, between bites. "I clocked you doing 40 in a school zone. Lemme see your license, registration and proof of insurance." As you hand the man your documents, you can't help wondering if he's for real. This fellow doesn't fit the image of authority and professionalism you had pictured for one of your town's finest. Where's the uniform? The badge? The courteous and professional demeanor? Were it not for the flashing lights you would have no indication at all that this man with crumbs on his shirt is an officer of the law.

In a few minutes he comes back and returns your paperwork. This time another young man is with him. "This is my friend," the policeman says regarding his companion. "He's not a police officer. He's just along with me for the ride today. But he's going to write you a speeding ticket." The young man fills out a form, tears off the top sheet, and hands you a court summons. You take the ticket with amazement, wondering what is happening. You can bear the indignity of being called to account for your traffic infraction, but you've been treated contemptuously and unprofessionally by someone who is supposed to represent the law, and you've been served a summons by someone who holds no office and bears no authority. The whole farcical encounter is a disgrace to the police force and the community it represents.



There is arguably more understanding about offices held by those who serve in the kingdoms of this world - what Martin Luther called the left-hand realm of God - than about the office of the public ministry. We understand implicitly that in the world no one can exercise secular authority unless it is given to him (a public call). He cannot assume it for himself. We expect that one who exercises temporal power will be sworn into office and publicly acknowledged as one who has been empowered by the people to serve in their name (ordained or installed). We expect that as he functions under normal cir-

cumstances he will wear a uniform (vestments) or a badge, as a symbol or sign of his authority. We understand that the office of temporal power is filled by people with different names and titles, such as patrolman, deputy, state trooper, detective, agent, and even parking meter reader. While the scope and responsibility of each position is different, all serve in a public office in the name of the people.

Yet when it comes to the office of the ministry of the Word, there is often needless confusion that runs to extremes. At one extreme we find the notion that every Christian is a minister – a viewpoint that scarcely recognizes any formal office of the ministry. The pastor is seen as a role model, adviser and life coach, but little more. At the other extreme we find the hyper-clerical notion that the ministerial office stands alone as a higher priestly caste, lording its unimpeachable authority over the flock, and refusing to be held accountable by God’s people. As the ministerial office at one end of the spectrum is disparaged and held in contempt, a reaction at the other end is to take the ministerial office far beyond the words of Scripture. Neither extreme serves the church or the truth.

Amid such conflicting voices, Pastor Webber cuts through the confusion with a clear exposition of the truth. He echoes the voices of Luther and other Lutheran theologians, who trace the origin of the public ministry, not just to Pentecost or to the call of the apostles, but all the way back to Eden. The public ministry of the Christian church, in its essence, was not born with the appointment of the Twelve, or with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. It is a continuation of the ministerial office that was present and carefully defined in the Old Testament. The office of father was established by God at creation. From the authority of fatherly oversight flow vocations to govern in the family, in the world, and in the church. The Fourth Commandment, given at Sinai, codifies the unchanging and universal moral law that obedience is owed to those who exercise authority as God’s representatives, whether in the family, in temporal government, or in the church.

When we understand the public ministry as spiritual fatherhood, that spiritual fatherhood – incarnate in the office of the ministry – defines the office itself, along with its roles and functions. The ministerial office is not merely a part of an expedient organizational structure, or a component of a practical business model. It is the loving exercise of spiritual authority in the church (which is our spiritual mother), according to God’s own design: with the use of God’s Word; and under the authority of God’s Word. God’s institution of marriage and family cannot legitimately be re-imagined today as a human contrivance to be redefined according to human notions. In the same

way, God's institution of spiritual authority cannot be redefined for modern times to suit feminist preferences, or to appease any other ideology of this world that is currently waging war on the office of spiritual fatherhood. In a culture that despises authority and disparages fathers, God's design for the loving oversight of his church continues unchanged.

*Spiritual Fathers* is not an exegetical work that focuses on a re-examination of the Scripture passages that speak of ministry. It is, rather, a systematic work that compiles, and weaves together, harmonious testimonies from orthodox voices throughout church history. Drawing from the teaching and example of God's Word, from the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, and from the long history of pastoral practice in Christendom, Pastor Webber leads the reader on a fresh and lively walk down the narrow Lutheran middle. *Spiritual Fathers* belongs in the personal library of every Christian who wants to speak with a clear, orthodox voice in addressing the ministry issues of today.

*Jon D. Buchholz, President  
Arizona-California District  
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
The Ascension of Our Lord, 2013*



## 2.

*“There are also spiritual fathers”*

It is significant that Luther, in his 1529 Large Catechism, does not explain and develop the doctrine of the Public Ministry of the Gospel as a part of his discussion of the Third Article of the Creed, but instead considers this subject chiefly as a part of his commentary on the Fourth Commandment. Those who imagine that the Public Ministry, in its essence, is a post-Pentecost creation of the church, might expect to find a discussion of the Public Ministry in that section of the Large Catechism where the doctrine of the church is expounded. But that is not where such a discussion is to be found. And a part of the reason for this is because the Public Ministry, in its essence, is *not* in fact a creation of the church.

In his Large Catechism explanation of the Fourth Commandment, Luther writes:

So we have introduced three kinds of fathers in this [fourth] commandment: fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of the nation.<sup>15</sup> In addition, there are also spiritual fathers – not like those in the papacy who have had themselves called “father” but have not performed a fatherly function [office<sup>16</sup>]. For the name of spiritual father belongs only to those who *govern and guide us by the Word of God*. St. Paul boasts that he is such a father in 1 Corinthians 4[:15], where he says, “In Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.” Because they are fathers, they are entitled to honor, even above all others. But they very seldom receive it, for the world’s way of honoring them is to chase them out of the country and to begrudge them even a piece of bread. In short, as St. Paul says [1 Cor. 4:13], they must be “the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things.” Yet it is necessary to impress upon the common people that they who would bear the name of Christian owe it to God to show “double honor” [1 Timothy 5:17] to those who *watch over their souls* and to treat them well and make provision for them. If you do, God will also give you what you need and not let you suffer want. But here everyone resists and rebels; all are afraid that their bellies will suffer, and therefore they cannot now support *one good preacher*, although in the past they filled ten fat paunches. For



this we deserve to have God deprive us of his Word and blessing and once again allow preachers of lies to arise who lead us to the devil – and wring sweat and blood out of us besides.<sup>17</sup>

Luther's discussion here is concerning our "spiritual fathers," who "govern and guide us by the Word of God," and who "watch over" our souls. We note that Luther applies what he says about the honor that is due to a spiritual father to the way in which a congregation should be willing to provide support for a "good preacher" in its midst. When Luther speaks of "spiritual fathers" in this context, he has pastors and preachers specifically in mind.

This understanding is confirmed by the pertinent section of Luther's "Ten Sermons on the Catechism," which had been preached in 1528. The text of the Large Catechism, issued the following year, followed the text of these sermons very closely. In his sermon on the Fourth Commandment, Luther had said that

there are three kinds of fathers: [fathers by birth, in the household, and] fathers of the land. The fourth kind are the bishops... ..for those who are true Christians, it is right that they should honor their bishops, because they watch over their souls and administer the sacraments to them. I shall not preach much about this, for I too am one of these. In short, if you honor your parents, masters, princes, and bishops, [says God,] you must not worry about where you are going to get a wife, husband, house and home. Let Me take care of that. If you honor your prince, burgomaster, and preacher, let Me take care of how you will get enough to live on. ... This should make us melt with love and lift up our hands in gratitude that we have a master, a mistress, a prince, burgomaster, preacher in whom we honor only God. ... Therefore, honor all who can be called father – father and mother, master and mistress, prince, burgomaster, and preacher!<sup>18</sup>

We see, then, that where the Large Catechism of 1529 had spoken of "spiritual fathers," who govern and guide us by the word of God and who watch over our souls, the 1528 sermon had explicitly spoken instead of "bishops" and "preachers," who watch over our souls and administer the sacraments to us.

These observations regarding Luther's intended application of the idea of a "spiritual father" in the Large Catechism are also validated by an examination of his 1520 "Treatise on Good Works," which obviously stands behind both the 1528 sermon and the 1529 catechism. In commenting on the Fourth Commandment, "Thou shalt

honor thy father and mother," Luther writes in this earlier treatise:

From this commandment we teach that after the excellent works of the first three commandments there are no better works than to obey and serve all those who are set in authority over us. ...what is said and commanded of parents must also be understood of those who, when the parents are dead or not there, take their place, such as friends, relatives, godparents, temporal lords, and *spiritual fathers*. For everybody must be ruled and subject to other men. ... The second work of this commandment is to honor and obey our *spiritual mother*, the holy Christian church, and [its] *spiritual authorities*. We must conform to what they command, forbid, appoint, ordain, bind, and loose. We must honor, fear, and love the spiritual authorities as we do our natural parents, and yield to them in all things that are not contrary to the first three commandments. ... The spiritual authorities should punish sin with the ban and with laws, and constrain their spiritual children to be pious, motivate them to do this work, to practice obedience, and to honor the authorities. You do not see this kind of zeal today. ... They do not preach, they do not teach, they do not restrain, they do not punish, and no spiritual government at all remains in Christendom. ... But spiritual authorities should see to it that adultery, unchastity, usury, gluttony, worldly show, excessive adornment, and other such blatant sin and shame are most severely punished and rectified. And further, the endowments, monastic houses, parishes, and schools should be properly managed and real worship maintained within them. *The spiritual authorities should take care of the young people, both boys and girls, in schools and cloisters, and provide them with learned and pious men for teachers that they may all be well brought up.* ... St. Paul enjoins his disciple Titus that he should properly instruct and govern all classes, young and old, men and women [Titus 2:1-10]. ... If a bishop would devotedly take care of all these demands, see to them, make visitations, and fulfil all his responsibilities in the way that he should, then even one single city would be too much for him. For in the days of the apostles, when Christendom was at its best, each city had a bishop... It is time we prayed to God for mercy. We have plenty of spiritual authorities, but little or no spiritual government. In the meantime, may he who is able give what help he can, so that institutions, monasteries, parishes, and schools may be well ordered and governed.<sup>19</sup>

In this 1520 treatise, Luther speaks of the "spiritual fathers" who rule over us, and to whom we are therefore "subject." He also

describes the holy Christian church as our “spiritual mother,” whom we are to “honor and obey.” He then combines or harmonizes these two complementary parental images by recasting the “spiritual fathers” as those who are also, simultaneously, the “spiritual authorities” of the church, who speak and act on behalf of the church. As Luther goes on to describe the responsibilities of these “spiritual authorities,” he makes it clear that he is speaking of people like Titus in the New Testament, and of the bishops and pastors of the apostolic and post-apostolic church, who properly are to exercise the duties of “spiritual government” among us.<sup>20</sup>

From one point of view, then, such bishops and pastors are our “spiritual fathers.” From another point of view, these same bishops and pastors are the “spiritual authorities” who represent and serve our one “spiritual mother” (that is, the church). This imagery corresponds to the fact that in ordinary human relationships, a father of children can at the same time also be a dutiful son and servant of his own mother. That, in effect, is what the bishops, pastors, and preachers of the church are.