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# Apostolic Succession

**S**INCE The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod at its 1959 San Francisco convention asked the faculties of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, to make available pertinent statements on the subject of "Apostolic Succession" (1959 *Proceedings*, p. 194), we offer the following brief summation of the Lutheran position together with a few observations.

1. The church is built on Jesus Christ, the Foundation and the Chief Cornerstone. It is the living body of Christ of which our Lord is the Head and of which all who believe in Him are members.

*1 Cor. 3:11*

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

*1 Peter 2:6*

For it stands in Scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a Stone, a Cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in Him will not be put to shame."

*Rom. 12:4, 5*

For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function,

So we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.

*Eph. 1:22, 23*

And He has put all things under His feet and has made Him the Head over all things for the church,

Which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

*Eph. 2:19-22*

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with

the saints and members of the household of God,

Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the Chief Cornerstone,

In whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;

In whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

2. God builds and upholds His church through the Gospel and the sacraments. Lutherans, therefore, hold that the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments are the "marks of the church."

*Eph. 4:4-6*

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call,

One Lord, one faith, one Baptism,

One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.

*1 Peter 2:1-5*

So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander.

Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation;

For you have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Come to Him, to that living Stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious.

*Ap VII 20*

We are not dreaming about some Platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure



teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments. This church is properly called "the pillar of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), for it retains the pure Gospel and what Paul calls the "foundation" (1 Cor. 3:12), that is, the true knowledge of Christ and faith. Of course, there are also many weak people in it who build on this foundation perishing structures of stubble, that is, unprofitable opinions. But because they do not overthrow the foundation, these are forgiven them or even corrected.

3. The church is built upon the apostolic doctrine and confession.

*Eph. 2:20*

Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the Chief Cornerstone.

*Matt. 16:18, 19*

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

*Tractate 25*

As to the statement, "On this rock I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18), it is certain that the church is not built on the authority of a man but on the ministry of the confession which Peter made when he declared Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of God. Therefore Christ addresses Peter as a minister and says, "On this rock," that is, on this ministry.

God, therefore, instituted the office of the holy ministry for the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

*Matt. 28:19, 20*

Go therefore and make disciples of all

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.

*John 20:21-23*

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you."

And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

*1 Cor. 4:1*

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

*2 Cor. 5:18*

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

*AC V*

(The Office of the Ministry) To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.

Condemned are the Anabaptists and others who teach that the Holy Spirit comes to us through our own preparations, thoughts, and works without the external Word of the Gospel.

*LC II 54, 55*

Further we believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacra-



ments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel. Toward forgiveness is directed everything that is to be preached concerning the sacraments, and, in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. Forgiveness is needed constantly, for although God's grace has been won by Christ, and holiness has been wrought by the Holy Spirit through God's Word in the unity of the Christian church, yet because we are encumbered with our flesh we are never without sin.

Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live. Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us because we are in the Christian church, where there is full forgiveness of sin. God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another.

4. The New Testament specifically mentions apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers, bishops, elders and deacons,

*Acts 20:28*

Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the church of the Lord, which He obtained with His own blood.

*Eph. 4:11*

And His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.

*Titus 1:7*

For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain.

*1 Tim. 3:8*

Deacons likewise must be serious, not

double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain.

*Acts 6:2-6*

And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables.

"Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty.

"But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word."

And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them.

*Matt. 23:8*

But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren.

regards all of them as fellow laborers and brethren in Christ, but it does not provide directives for specific forms of ministerial succession or orders.

5. The Lutheran Confessions recognize that the church as the priesthood of believers possesses the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers.

*Tractate 67, 69*

(67) Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers.

This right is a gift given exclusively to the church, and no human authority can take it away from the church. It is as Paul testified to the Ephesians when he says, "When He ascended on high, He gave gifts



to men" (Eph. 4:8, 11, 12). He enumerates pastors and teachers among the gifts belonging exclusively to the church, and he adds that they are given for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Where the true church is, therefore, the right of electing and ordaining ministers must of necessity also be. So in an emergency even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another. It is like the example which Augustine relates of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen), and the latter, after his Baptism, absolved the former.

(69) "You are a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). These words apply to the true church which, since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers.

They assert that the distinction between bishops and pastors is not by divine right but by human authority. They do not differentiate between pastors and bishops as valid ordinator.

*Tractate 63-65; 72*

(63-65) Jerome therefore teaches that the distinction between the grades of bishop and presbyter (or pastor) is by human authority. The fact itself bears witness to this, for the power is the same, as I have already stated. Afterwards one thing made a distinction between bishops and pastors, and this was ordination, for it was decided that one bishop should ordain the ministers in a number of churches. But since the distinction between bishop and pastor is not by divine right, it is manifest that ordination administered by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine right.

(72) From these facts it is evident that the church retains the right of electing and ordaining ministers. Wherefore, when the bishops are heretics or refuse to administer

ordination, the churches are by divine right compelled to ordain pastors and ministers for themselves. And it is the wickedness and tyranny of bishops that give occasion to schism and discord, for Paul commands that bishops who teach and defend impious doctrines and impious forms of worship should be regarded as anathema.

Although they treat episcopal polity as a matter of acceptable historic practice, they do not regard episcopal polity as necessary for the valid and efficacious ministry of Word and Sacrament.

*Ap XIV. (Ecclesiastical Order) 1-5*

With the proviso that we employ canonical ordination, they accept Article XIV, where we say that no one should be allowed to administer the Word and the sacraments in the church unless he is duly called. On this matter we have given frequent testimony in the assembly to our deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority. We know that the Fathers had good and useful reasons for instituting ecclesiastical discipline in the manner prescribed by the ancient canons. But the bishops either force our priests to forsake and condemn the sort of doctrine we have confessed, or else, in their unheard of cruelty, they kill the unfortunate and innocent men. This keeps our priests from acknowledging such bishops. Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical government in some places, despite our earnest desire to keep it. Let them see to it how they will answer God for disrupting the church.

In this issue our consciences are clear, and we dare not approve the cruelty of those who persecute this teaching, for we know that our confession is true, godly, and catholic. We know that the church is



present among those who rightly teach the Word of God and rightly administer the sacraments. It is not present among those who seek to destroy the Word of God with their edicts, who even butcher anyone who teaches what is right and true, though the canons themselves are gentler with those who violate them. Furthermore, we want at this point to declare our willingness to keep the ecclesiastical and canonical polity, provided that the bishops stop raging against our churches. This willingness will be our defense, both before God and among all nations, present and future, against the charge that we have undermined the authority of the bishops. Thus men may read that, despite our protest against the unjust cruelty of the bishops, we could not obtain justice.

6. From these confessional principles and within the frame of these Biblical teachings Lutherans hold that the precise kind of ministerial succession and the precise kind of ecclesiastical polity are in the strict sense of the term *adiaphora*, i. e., things indifferent, which the Holy Scriptures explicitly neither command nor con-

demn. It follows that Lutheran churches need not be disturbed as long as a particular ministerial succession or a precise polity is not made a part of the essence either of the church or of the ministry and the freedom of the church to devise its polity and forms of ministry is preserved.

7. In the 20th century most American Lutherans prefer synodical and congregational polity. Many European Lutheran churches have continued the episcopal polity without endorsing a doctrine of the church and ministry which is dependent upon an alleged apostolic succession.

8. Lutherans in America ought to be aware that the question of "apostolic succession" occupies a prominent place in ecumenical discussions, especially in the Asiatic churches, such as the church of South India, and among Lutheran churches of Africa.

Adopted by the faculties of Concordia Seminary of Springfield, Ill., and Concordia Seminary of St. Louis, Mo., on Feb. 3, 1962.