

AUTHORITY AND 'POWER' IN THE CHURCH

A. BASIC DEFINITIONS

1. **Jesus Christ** is the Lord of the church. He creates, sustains and empowers the church through the Holy Spirit at work in the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Christ calls, authorises and empowers the church to do his will and he promises to be with it to the end of time (Matt 28:18-20).
2. **The Holy Scriptures** reveal Christ's word to the church and his will for it. The Scriptures are the true source and norm of what is to be taught in the church. They are, therefore, the supreme authority in the church.
3. **The Lutheran Confessions** are authoritative in the Lutheran church because we believe that they correctly interpret Scripture.
4. God's word—written, proclaimed and enacted—is the 'power of God to salvation'. Through this word **the Holy Spirit** judges, convicts, works faith, forgives, reproves and corrects those who hear it, 'when and where he pleases' (Augsburg Confession, article 5).
5. The **authority given to the church** and the power it exercises cannot be separated from the nature of the church. This includes its hiddenness, servant form, function and those holy things that mark it as church: the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. Thus what creates the church also gives it authority and power. In talking about how bishops and pastors exercise such power and authority, the Augsburg Confession says:

The power of the church possesses its own command to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments... to forgive sins, to reject teaching that opposes the gospel, and to exclude from the communion of the church the ungodly whose ungodliness is known—doing all this not with human power but by the Word. (AC 28, 'Concerning the Church's Power', 12, 21)ⁱ
6. We should **distinguish between authority** for ministry **and power** for ministry. 'Authority' here refers to the God-given right to speak and act in a certain way; 'power' is the God-given ability to do so. Although closely related because both have a divine source, authority and power are not to be confused. A pastor may have—or claim to have—the charismatic power of the Spirit, but that does not mean that he has any authority other than the authority of word and sacrament which every pastor exercises. Pastoral authority in no way means authoritarianism.
7. The Lutheran Confessions also consistently **distinguish between** authority that persons in the church have by virtue of **divine call, gift, and command**, and authority that people possess by virtue of **human arrangement** and agreement. The former belongs to the essence of the church, the latter to its well being.ⁱⁱ The failure to make this distinction can lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

B. THE NATURE AND EXERCISE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

8. Those who have been called and appointed to the office of the public ministry exercise spiritual **authority from Christ**. He, not the church, instituted this office. It exists within the church but not over the church, except in the sense that the church is under the word which pastors proclaim. It is an office of service to the Lord and to his church, carried out in obedience to the Lord and in keeping with God's word.
9. The authority given to those who are called to the office of ministry is **essential** for the growth and nurture of the church. It is the authority to serve the church with word and sacraments, which are the marks of the church and the source of its life.
10. Pastors have authority to function in the public office not because they are especially holy or gifted or have an inner call (though these factors are important), but because the church has publicly **called** (see AC 14) **and ordained** them.
11. **Presidents, too**, receive authority to exercise their function of oversightⁱⁱⁱ in guiding and leading the church **by election and public call**. The episcopal function of presidents is also an exercise of the authority that derives from the gospel (see also 17. and 32. below).
12. The called and ordained pastor or president exercises the authority and power of the public ministry 'in the person of Christ'.^{iv} Such authority and power are **not natural abilities but divine gifts** to be used in and for the church. 'The transcendent power belongs to God and not to us' (2 Cor 4:7). The authority and power is in the spoken and enacted word.

The ministry of the New Testament . . . exists wherever God gives God's gifts: apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers...That ministry is not valid because of the authority of any person but because of the Word handed down by Christ. (Treatise 26)

13. The spiritual authority God gives to pastors and presidents consists in an '**ordering authority**' to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments, and a '**jurisdictional authority**'^v 'to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are repentant and ask for absolution' (Apology 28, 13).

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...This power is exercised only by teaching and preaching the gospel and by administering the sacraments. (AC 28, 5,8)

14. The '**ordering authority**'— the authority to conduct public worship in an orderly way— is God's power at work **in the gospel** itself. 'The word of the cross is the power of God' (1 Cor 1:17, 18, 24). Pastors and presidents properly assert their spiritual authority in the church by preaching and teaching the gospel. Power is present in the truthful speech of God's ministers (2 Cor 6:7).
15. **The Holy Spirit** makes the seemingly foolish and weak word of the cross a powerful message of life. Thus 'Spirit and power' (1 Cor 2:4) are two

expressions saying the same thing. Spiritual power always has its source in the Spirit; it is a gift of the Spirit.

16. In practice, the power of jurisdiction or **authority to exclude sinners** from the Lord's Supper has rarely been regarded as the exclusive right of the pastor (see Treatise 24). But pastors should not take this as an excuse to abdicate responsibility for admitting people to the Lord's Table.

C. THE AUTHORITY TO EXERCISE OVERSIGHT

17. The spiritual authority of the ministry includes the **authority to exercise oversight**.^{vi} All pastors exercise this aspect of spiritual authority but, by human arrangement, special oversight is given to presidents. Spiritual authority thus belongs to one office, which may be pluriform in expression (eg exercised by a pastor, ordained seminary lecturer or president).
18. The spiritual authority exercised by a pastor and president or bishop **differs in scope**. One form cannot be played off against the other as though one is an authority by divine mandate, the other only by human mandate. This is a false antithesis. Tensions also arise when pastors insist that they have the same spiritual power and authority as the president. The question of 'good order'—something which AC 28 emphasises in its discussion of episcopal authority—should be decisive in determining how the ministry of oversight carried out by pastor and that of the president can together work for the good of the church (see also 29.–32. below).
19. The Constitution of the LCA should provide for the **adequate and effective exercise of spiritual oversight** in the church. The present Constitution grants presidents powers of oversight that are severely limited and curtailed.

D. HOW AUTHORITY CAN BE ABUSED AND MINUNDERSTOOD

20. Although spiritual authority and power are of divine origin, they **can be abused, neglected, and subverted**. Pastors and presidents abuse and even negate their authority when they
- teach and preach falsely, failing to proclaim law and gospel or turning the gospel into law
 - profane the holy office of the ministry by leading an ungodly life or by treating holy things carelessly, sloppily, or with contempt
 - fail to show that they belong to God, come from God and know and live the will of God
 - forget their servant role and function, and use their divine authority for self-serving purposes
 - insist that others acknowledge and heed their authority, while they themselves refuse to live as persons under authority.
21. The spiritual authority of pastors and presidents involves words and actions that may appear to be anything but powerful. They may appear to be weak, ordinary, impotent and ineffectual. Misled by appearances, some members of the church may conclude that a pastor or president has no divine authority or power. They may therefore seek to **cast them in the role of director, manager, bureaucrat, hired hand or church functionary**.

22. Another cause of misunderstanding is the **failure to distinguish** between the **authority to regulate** the public office and the **authority of the office** itself. The church and its congregations have the authority to place men in the office and the responsibility to support them. The authority of the office itself, however, is grounded in the word that founds the office and which the office-holders proclaim. No church or congregation can usurp, ignore or privatise this authority. Instead, the church and its congregations are to ensure that the word has 'free and public course to establish its own authority' (G Forde).
23. Congregations owe their pastors obedience, and the church owes its presidents obedience (Heb 13:17). This means obedience to the gospel (Apology 18, 20). A **misguided anti-clericalism** or suspicion of all forms of hierarchy can lead congregations to ignore and despise the authority which their pastor or president has from God. Refusal to live under authority, a familiar Australian trait, is exacerbated when a pastor or president abuses his authority or himself refuses to submit to authority.

What needs to be recaptured, understood, and worked out in the church is that... by calling and ordaining to this office, the congregations and structures place themselves under the hearing of the Word...They recognize that what transcends them (and pastors) is the divine word publicly proclaimed . . . The public office and the proper ordering of that office, demanding as that ordering may be, comprise the instance through which final authority is exercised in the church.

The authority establishes itself through the Word preached and heard, and sacraments given and received. The point of the office is to see to it that what is preached in the church is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the final exercise of 'authority'. The only defense against anti-clericalism is not to demean or belittle the office but rather to have a clergy that distinguishes between law and gospel and so preaches the gospel as God's final Word to us. (G Forde)

E. THE NATURE AND EXERCISE OF PERSONAL AUTHORITY

24. In the church there are men and women who possess personal authority. This authority develops through the exercise of **gifts that have their source and origin in God**. These gifts are given to people for the nurture of the church and for witness to the world.
25. One kind of personal authority is that possessed by people who, through a combination of education, experience, and charisma become special **bearers of the theological tradition** of the church. Such people are able to articulate the tradition clearly and authoritatively. They have the ability to be theologically creative and even innovative, while remaining faithful to the tradition. They are wise in a practical way, combining in themselves common sense, awareness of the world and theological acumen.
26. People who possess a charisma and piety that sets them apart from others display another kind of personal authority. Others look to them as **models of Christian living**. They incarnate many of the Christian virtues and are able, by their strong and optimistic faith in Christ and in the power of the gospel, to breathe new life into their fellow-Christians. Their burning conviction that they walk with God gives assurance, enthusiasm, and value to all that they do. God

has given many such men and women as his gifts to the LCA, its congregations and districts.

27. The authority of these gifted people **can be diminished, disregarded, abused and negated by them** when they
- employ it for purposes of self-aggrandisement or to manipulate people so that they do the will and follow the lead of the authority figure
 - use their authority to bolster an eccentric theological view which, because of their standing in the church, is accepted as the true position of the church
 - live a life which is out of keeping with their profession
 - flaunt their authority in mischievous opposition to other authority in the church, especially that of the pastor
 - use their authority to stifle healthy debate and to prevent needed change.
28. The authority of such gifted people **can be undermined and demeaned by others** when
- people refuse to rejoice in and to utilise these gifts of God to the church out of envy or for whatever reason
 - deliberate efforts are made to diminish a person's spiritual authority by means of scandalous innuendo or unsubstantiated and irresponsible allegations of false teaching or improper conduct
 - the political authorities in the church suppress the activities and influence of those who have personal authority.

F. THE EXERCISE OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

29. In the church there are people and groups who have what may be called political authority. The Lutheran church does not recognise a divinely appointed form of church government. Church polity, and therefore political authority, belongs to the **proper organisation** of the church. This is the function of a church constitution.
30. The **church is free to order itself** and to grant political authority to persons and groups of persons, such as presidents and councils, as it sees fit. Here the over-riding concern should be to provide the maximum of possibilities for preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments (see 38. below).
31. Persons such as elders and presidents, and groups of persons such as councils and boards that have been duly elected and given constitutional authority to make decisions and disburse funds, exercise a **political power which members of the church should acknowledge** and heed in the Lord.
- It is fitting for the churches to comply with such ordinances for the sake of love and tranquility and to keep them insofar as they do not offend others. Thus, everything may be done in an orderly fashion in the churches without confusion, but in such a way that consciences are not burdened. (AC 28, 55)
32. It is improper to argue that obedience to political authority in the church is optional because it exists by human arrangement, whereas obedience to spiritual authority is required because it is of God. Both spiritual and political authority in the church are 'of God'. **God also gives political authority** through the agreement of the church to comply with the constitution and its by-laws. The church cannot function as synod without the political leadership of those whom the church invests with authority to lead.

33. Political authority is **abused and undermined** to the detriment of the life and mission of the church when
- a person or group of persons wields political power in an exploitative way or in a way which makes people feel that they are being manipulated, so that credibility is lost
 - political power is used in a competitive way, so that power struggles develop between persons or groups of persons who want to extend and preserve their own little kingdoms.
34. Unhealthy tensions and conflicts arise when political authority is used inappropriately or coercively or when people are treated as tools, fools, or even as adversaries by those with political authority. This is especially true where the cultural climate accentuates and aggravates negative reactions when people see that **authority and power have been used improperly**. Likewise, frustrations occur in the church when those who have been granted political authority refuse to exercise their powers, or do so ineffectively, unwisely, or incompetently.
35. The church suffers from a **failure to distinguish between different kinds of authority** in the church. Sometimes those with personal and/or spiritual authority are given political authority even though they are not gifted, qualified or competent to exercise it. On the other hand, those gifted with the ability to exercise political power properly and effectively are often not placed in positions of authority.
36. Church leaders serve the church poorly when they do not exercise power and authority in the **style of servants**. Similarly, members who are moved by a warped understanding of Christian liberty to refuse to honour and obey those who properly exercise power and authority in the church also serve the church poorly.
37. Problems with authority and power will continue in the church. The church is both an **organism** united in Christ **and an organisation** that needs structures and leadership. Effective leadership requires the giving of authority and power to individuals and groups so that work can be done effectively.
38. Where organism gives way to organisation is sometimes a grey area. There is a **good rule to remember when administrative tensions arise** between people as they relate in the common task of ministry.

The church is correctly ordered in the sense of Lutheran teaching when it is so constituted as to offer the office of the ministry a maximum of possibilities to accomplish its service of proclamation of the pure gospel and of the proper administration of the sacraments in the name and according to the commission of the church, and when it preserves a maximum of possibilities for the congregation which Jesus Christ himself has called through the Word and sacraments to live in the world and to carry out its service for human creatures. (Sasse)

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ⁱ Quotations from the *Book of Concord* are taken from the Kolb-Wengert edition, Fortress, Minneapolis, 2000.

ⁱⁱ The distinction, in Latin, is that between the *esse* and the church and its *bene esse*.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Greek word for 'oversight' is *episkope*, thus the New Testament word for bishops is *episkopoi*.

^{iv} The Latin phrase *in persona Christi* means more than 'instead of/on behalf of Christ'. It means that Christ is himself speaking and acting through the pastor, who is himself 'in Christ' (2 Cor 2:10,17).

^v It is difficult to translate the Latin phrases used in Apology 28, 13: *potestas ordinis* and *potestas jurisdictionis*. The translation of the first phrase as 'power of the order', in both the Tappert and Kolb-Wengert editions of the *Book of Concord*, is hardly satisfactory. Meant is the authority to conduct the public worship of the church in an ordered way (not to give orders). See *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, Concordia, 2 ed, 1975, 378.

^{vi} Again, *episkope* is meant.