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Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace

Essay #2—

The Mission of the Church

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Before we get into the business of the mission of the church, it is important to know what the church is. The Lutheran Confessions with the help of Scripture define the church in the proper sense as “the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII/VIII:28). Edward W. A. Koehler in his book *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* says: “All those whom the Holy Spirit through the Gospel has ‘called out of darkness into His marvelous light,’ constitute that ‘chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God’s own possession’ (1 Peter 2:9), which is called the Church” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 236).

This one church is headed by Christ: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour” (Ephesians 5:23). Luther also writes in his Large Catechism: “I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism” (Large Catechism, Third Article: 51). However, not all is holy in the visible church of professing believers. A visible gathering may contain unbelievers who only pretend to be believers. Jesus pointed this out in Matthew 13:47-50, where he says: “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This means there are hypocrites in the church (actually “churches”) on earth. These hypocrites and wicked people are members of the church according to the outward associations of the church’s marks, that is, Word, confession, and sacraments.

Therefore the invisible church is the total number of those who have true biblical faith in their hearts, that is, in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The visible church is the total number of those who profess the Christian faith. The invisible church is hidden within the visible church, known only to God.

Christ has given the mission to this church.

We have looked at what the church is; now we want to look at the responsibility Christ has given to his church. We call this responsibility, “the mission of the church.” Christ revealed the

church's mission in the four Gospels of the New Testament; these are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I will survey this mission by following the order as outlined in the Bible. The first mission, actually known as the Great Commission, is found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Jesus opens the mission by assuring his disciples, who had gathered on the mountain in Galilee, that he is the leader of the church, the one who was given "all authority in heaven and on earth." He said these words after he rose from the dead and was about to go to his Father. These were important words of instruction from Jesus to his disciples. On the basis of that authority, Jesus told his disciples to make more disciples as they preached, baptised, and taught. The disciples were under the authority of Jesus in their mission of making disciples. The authority of Jesus comes from his divine throne in heaven where he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty (*Luther's Catechism*, p. 170). With this same authority, Jesus still commands us to tell others the good news and make them disciples for the kingdom.

Jesus has total power and control over the world; he rules "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21). When Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he was developing confidence and trust in his disciples. He was telling them that they were not alone; they had a strong leader behind them, the head of the Great Commission. This is the same assurance that Jesus is giving to his church today. We should make disciples without fear or favour because we have a divine leader who has all authority on earth.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus said, "Therefore go." Now the word "go" is a participle (*poreuthentes*), literally, "having gone." This means Jesus is telling them that unless they go to people, what he commands them will not happen. The mission Jesus gave to his disciples was to "make disciples of all nations." A disciple is a learner and a follower of Jesus Christ, a believer. In this commission, Jesus commanded his disciples to go to all unbelievers who do not yet know Christ as Saviour and teach them about this Saviour. This is the same mission that Jesus Christ has given to our church today. He is saying "Go!" We have to go out to all unbelievers throughout the world and make disciples. We are Christ's messengers. There will not be Christians if we do not go out to preach and teach people about the Saviour.

Jesus Christ has commissioned the church to make disciples. This activity of making disciples is qualified by the two words: "baptising and teaching"; therefore, the commission of Jesus Christ will include Baptism and teaching. The Bible clearly teaches that through Baptism, God washes away sin: "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins'" (Acts 2:38). In the book of Titus 3:5, the Bible says: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Baptism is called a "washing of rebirth." This is how the Holy Spirit converts people from spiritual death to spiritual life. Through Baptism, the gospel marked by a visible sign (water), the Holy Spirit makes disciples.

When unbelievers are turned into believers by the power of the Holy Spirit, the commission is not yet complete. Jesus added, “Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This means that after the Holy Spirit converts people through Baptism, the church takes up another responsibility—that is teaching believers to obey everything he (Jesus) has commanded them. “To obey” is to hold firmly to, to guard, and to do what one is told. For example, if someone gives you a precious gift, he will advise you to take care of that gift. He will instruct you to guard it jealously and to hold firmly to the gift which is already in your hands. This will often involve effort on your part.

Since the mission of the church is to make disciples throughout the world, baptising them and teaching them to obey everything Christ has commanded, the church has to continue nurturing the flock which has already been baptised and are followers of Christ. It is the duty of the church to continue teaching people to hold on firmly to everything they have learned. This must have an impact on their lives. It is thus the mission of the church to preserve and encourage the flock of believers to live safely according to the commands of the Good Shepherd. When Jesus says, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,” he is talking about the life of a person after they become a believer. It is our mission to help people grow in faith as disciples and to be preserved in faith through the Holy Spirit. As a light sends forth rays from the moment it begins to burn until it is extinguished, so also the sanctification of life begins the very moment faith is kindled in the heart, and it continues as long as the light of faith burns.

It is therefore also the mission of the church to help members’ light of faith in holy living to continue shining. Once the light shines, the moral attitude of man is radically changed; morally he becomes a new creature: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This inward change and renewal is the essence of sanctification. The church can accomplish this by using the means of grace. The gospel as manifested in the Word of God and the sacraments are used because the Holy Spirit creates faith through them. The Word of God which the church teaches keeps believers in faith; it helps believers guard everything they have been commanded to obey: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). Romans 1:16 says; “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”

In order for the church to continue fulfilling God’s command, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,” it should encourage all believers to study God’s Word. John 5:39 says: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” It is the mission of the church to educate believers through Bible study because it is only the gospel which God uses to preserve faith. Therefore, “we must learn and ponder His Word, and keep it in our hearts. . . . Neglecting to use the Word of God means spiritual starvation, spiritual suicide” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 177). If we study the Word, the light of faith will continue to burn because the Word of God will supply the oil for the lamp.

In the Great Commission “go and make disciples,” Jesus knew that he had put the precious gospel in jars of clay. This is why he promised to keep them company. The disciples were not

very strong in their faith. Some doubted: Matthew 28:17b, “but some doubted.” Knowing the situation, Jesus planted confidence within the disciples; he told them: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b). As we go out to make disciples, we should remember that this making of disciples is solely dependent on the power of the Word, the operation of the Spirit, and the authority of Jesus Christ. We should therefore carry out our mission confidently without fear because Jesus is with us to the very end of our mission.

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel.

We looked at the mission of the church in the light of the gospel commission of Matthew 28:18-20. We concentrated on the task of making disciples and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded us. We will continue by looking at the book of Mark 16:15-16: “He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” The book of Mark reinforces the mission of the church by repeating the command: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” The disciples were to proclaim the gospel, to tell it in a form of urging the people to see the importance of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel has even more to it: Mark 16:16 says, “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” This means that as the church goes preaching, there will be people who will reject God’s Word, and there will be some who will believe. This is just like the parable of the sower in the book of Matthew 13:3-9:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.”

From this parable, we see that there are some seeds which bear fruit and some which do not bear fruit. In the same way, when the church preaches the gospel, those who reject it will be condemned, while those who accept it will be saved (Mark 16:16).

According to the commission in Mark, we see that **the power of the church’s mission is the gospel**. This is because Christ has given to his church the Word of God: “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. . . . I have given them your word.” (John 17:8,14). By the Word people are to be brought to faith and sanctified. This is why the apostle Peter speaks of the “ministry of the word” in Acts 6:4.

Therefore, as the church carries out its mission “to preach the gospel,” it has no right to exercise secular power. “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place’” (John 18:36). Nor may the church employ the power of the state to compel people to accept the teachings of the gospel and to enforce Christian living (2 Corinthians 10:4: “The weapons we fight with are

not the weapons of the world”), or to imprison and burn heretics. The police of the state are neither an integral part of, nor an appendage to, the spiritual power of the church.

This is contrary to the claim of the Church of Rome that the pope has both the sword of temporal power and the sword of the Spirit. We hold that the state has the power of the sword, and the church has the power of the Word. “Not by force and fines, but by teaching and persuasion the Church wins men for Christ and induces them to live under Him in His kingdom” (Koehler, *Summary*, pp. 256, 257; See Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII). As the power of the church is exercised through the Word of God, it is definitely limited by this same Word. It reaches as far as the Word of God reaches, and not any further. According to Matthew 28:20 the church is to teach men to observe all Christ has commanded. Whatever the Bible teaches, commands, and promises, the church must teach, command, and promise. Beyond this the church has no power and authority. It is our divine right to preach the gospel not taking up the sword (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:18,21). Our mission is to preach the good news to all people.

The mission of the church is to preach repentance and forgiveness.

The Gospel of Luke tells us another aspect of the Lord’s commission to his church. Jesus appeared before his disciples after he rose from the dead. He appeared to give live evidence that he had indeed conquered death. He also wanted to encourage the disciples to carry with them this truth and present it to all the people. The truth he wanted them to carry was this: “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:46-49). This is the message the prophets foretold and Christ fulfilled.

Jesus wants the church to take this same message to all people. First, the church should preach about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then preach about repentance and forgiveness of sins: “And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). The chief truth of the gospel is that for Christ’s sake God has forgiven all sins to all men. This is the truth which we should preach to the world. We need to assure the penitent of a complete forgiveness of sins, yet at the same time withhold this assurance of forgiveness to anyone who remains impenitent: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).

The church has been given authority to proclaim to all people the blessed fact that God has reconciled the world to himself and the people’s sins have been forgiven. Paul states this truth clearly when he says: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). It is the mission of the church and actually the purpose of the office of the ministry to make known to the world the forgiveness of sins procured by Christ. Whenever and wherever we go, we must use the inviting message, “Be reconciled to God.” It is our duty as a church to warn everyone who does not repent and believe in Jesus Christ. We are to tell them that they will die in their sins if they do not repent: “I

told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24).

The church is to perform its mission by preaching and teaching the gospel, by administering the sacraments, by remitting and retaining sins.

Our teachers hold that according to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of bishops is a power or command of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” [John 20:21-23]. . . . 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. For it is not bodily things that are thus given, but rather such eternal things as eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These things cannot come about except through the ministry of Word and sacraments, for Paul says, “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” [Romans 1:16] and Ps. 119:50 states, “Thy word gives me life” (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:5-9).

This is the work of the church, to administer the means of grace, and this will always involve transmitting these promised blessings to man. It is impossible to preach the gospel without the forgiveness of sins, and to administer the sacraments without offering the remission of sins.

This is the mission of the church: “The power and right of the ministry of the Word (*Predigtamt*) is to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, forgive or retain sins, and practice discipline” (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, p. 207). This is what we call the power of the keys.

The mission of the church is to use the office of the keys.

This is spiritual power because it imparts spiritual blessings, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. It uses spiritual means, the gospel of the Word of God. This power was given by Christ to his church on earth. When Jesus addressed his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, he told them: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). Jesus has given the power to bind and loose sins to the church; therefore, the church forgives sins by the authority of Christ. In order to do this the church uses a twofold power of the keys: The loosing and binding keys:

For although there is one ministry of the Word by which sins are loosed and bound, as also in a general consideration there is one key that is effective for opening and closing the kingdom of heaven, nevertheless, because of the diversity of objects, means, and effects, one key is called the loosing key, by which penitent people are absolved of their sins and heaven is opened to them, and the other is called the binding key, by which the sins of the impenitent are retained and heaven is closed to them. (John Gerhard, quoted in Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, p. 208).

When we use the loosing or releasing key, we are declaring someone to be free from the guilt and punishment of sin. This is not a power beside and above the ordinary preaching of the gospel. Absolution is merely a specialised form of gospel preaching. "The power of the keys administers and offers the Gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the Gospel" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII:39). The meaning here is not that sins are first forgiven by God in heaven when the absolution is spoken, for Luther says: "The sins are already forgiven, before we confess them" (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 258). There is no soul in the entire world which God has not already absolved from all its sins because of the reconciliation through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them").

Absolution merely applies the message of grace and forgiveness to the individual in a more formal and direct way. This is what Christ says in John 20:23: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." These Bible passages are empowering the church. Jesus Christ is giving the church authority to remit sins. When the church forgives sins, it does so in the name of God, but it is not the church that does the actual forgiving; only God does that: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). The church acts like a spokesperson. The church merely transmits to the individual the forgiveness of God; the function of the church in this matter is purely instrumental (Koehler, *Summary*, pp. 258-259).

The *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* (pp. 209,210) puts it this way:

Absolution is no mere announcement. It is done not in a declarative manner (*declarative*), but effectively (*effective*). It really looses. . . . "The ministers of the church have the power to remit sins in such a way that they not only remit sins $\sigma\tau\omicron\rho\iota\kappa\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$, in a manner that declares and announces, but also effectively, and nevertheless $\rho\gamma\alpha\nu\iota\kappa\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$," i.e., "instrumentally."

The church is an instrument of God. As we go out to preach the gospel of forgiveness to all people, we should know that we are carrying out God's responsibility. There are many people out there who need God's forgiveness, even though they may not realize it. So let us go out and use the power of the keys, the power to forgive sins given us by Christ in order to help lead them to repentance and the assurance of their salvation.

We have looked at the loosing key, i.e. the right to forgive sins. Now we will look at the use of the binding key. The power to retain sins is what we call the binding key. Christ himself commissioned the church to do this in John 20:23: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven," as well as in Matthew 18:18: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

To retain sins, therefore, simply means to declare a certain fact, which fact would obtain even though the declaration were not made, namely, that the impenitent cannot and shall not have the forgiveness as long as he does not repent. And lest such a person think he could still have forgiveness despite his impenitence, the

Church has authority and power to make such declaration formally and officially.
(Koehler, *Summary*, p. 260)

Our work as a church is to use the authority given us by God. We preach the message of repentance and forgiveness to people and the people must accept this message in faith. Romans 1:17 says: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘the righteous will live by faith.’” Such forgiveness can be apprehended in no other way than by faith, “for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). But the impenitent person, lacking this faith, makes the grace and promise of God, as far as it concerns him, ineffectual: “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Hebrews 4:2). He thus excludes himself from the general amnesty proclaimed by God (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 260).

Much as we preach the gospel, we should know that some will reject it. This is where the church comes in with the binding key authorised by God to instill discipline.

The church must use right judgment in its mission.

The church may not use the power of the binding key indiscriminately or arbitrarily, but must strictly follow the instructions of Christ, to forgive sins to those who repent and not forgive those who do not repent. The church carries with its message the forgiveness which is readily available to all people, but it can only be granted to those who repent. When we go out into the world to make disciples, we should make sure that the component of repentance or sorrow over sin is displayed because it is necessary. We have one good example in the person of David that shows us that sins should be remitted to those who repent, but retained to those who do not repent: “Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan replied, ‘The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die’” (2 Samuel 12:13). As a church we have the authority to deal with sinners. This authority is given to us by Christ himself; therefore, any action we take as we deal with sinners is valid in heaven. Christ says, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). But we should be extra careful as we take on this responsibility of using the binding and loosing key. This is because we may err in our judgment by forgiving sins to an impenitent and retaining sins to a penitent sinner.

If it happens that the church errs in its judgment, i.e. it forgives sins to an impenitent and retains sins to a penitent sinner, such action is not valid. The penitent sinner will still receive the forgiveness in spite of what the church has said. The impenitent sinner will also not receive the forgiveness even though the church has forgiven him.

The mission of the church is to carry out church discipline.

In the mission of the church we are advised to guard against the public teaching of false doctrine. The Bible says: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). What we need to know is that we are not alone in the field of making disciples; we will come across different teachings. It is our duty as a church to test these teachings so that we can protect the believers from attack by false teachers.

The apostle John warns us: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1). We have this problem in Africa where we as Lutherans are accused of not having the Holy Spirit because we do not perform miracles, we do not speak in tongues, and we do not have the healing power.

The church should also guard against any persistent ungodly living among its members. It is the duty of the church to restore every erring brother. It is also our responsibility to rebuke any church member who strays. This duty is found in the office of the keys according to the book of Matthew in chapter 18:15-17 which guides us in this matter. It tells us that if a brother sins publicly, we should help him by showing him his sin. This is an ongoing plan until the person is won back to the sheep-pen. If he refuses to repent, it must result in discipline. All members of the body of Christ should be concerned about the spiritual well-being of each other; we must be each other’s keeper.

However, all disciplinary actions should be done out of love. Paul says: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1). The church will exercise the right to excommunicate someone who does not repent. This is done to admonish (out of love) those who have fallen so that they can amend their lives. However, the truly Christian excommunication excludes those who are manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacrament and other fellowship of the church until they mend their ways and avoid sin (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IX, p. 314).

The church must carry out disciplinary matters in an orderly way as prescribed in the Scriptures. The Scriptures have laid down steps of church discipline which must be followed. The church has to take time and observe confidentiality when dealing with disciplinary issues. The book of Matthew in chapter 18:15 tells us that we should talk to any brother/sister who falls into sin. This should be done in a private, humble, and loving manner. Persistent impenitence of the person is the reason the church excommunicates. The other reason for excommunication is not to destroy someone but to save him/her: “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

The moment a sinner realizes the danger that lies ahead, and repents, the church welcomes him/her into the communion of saints. This is Christian love at its best: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). This is how the gospel is preached and enacted in different areas of the mission of the church. All this we do to direct people to Christ for their salvation.

The mission of the church is to use the means of grace.

In order to better understand the mission of the church, we also need to bring in another very important tool, “the means of grace.”

The mission of the church is to use the means of grace, because this is God’s “delivery system” for his plan of salvation. We call the means of grace the delivery system, and they rightly occupy

a key place in the Lutheran church. As Lutherans, with the Bible we confess the means of grace to be “the way by which the Holy Spirit of God both offers and confers to the individual all the blessings procured by Christ through his life and death. Through the means of grace, God the Holy Spirit conveys to people the gift of forgiveness of sins won by Christ and works faith in the heart to accept this forgiveness. The means of grace are the link between Christ’s cross and a person’s heart” (Valleskey, *We Believe*, p. 94).

What are the means of grace? In his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, Edward W. A. Koehler defines the means of grace as “the Gospel and the Sacraments” (p. 189). But strictly speaking, we only have only one means of grace, i.e. the gospel. The sacraments become the means of grace because of the gospel which is connected with them. The apostle Paul tells us in the book of Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” The gospel (the glad tidings of God’s grace in Christ) is the means of grace because the Holy Spirit works saving faith in and through the gospel. The apostle Paul tells us: “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Furthermore, our focus on the gospel does not mean that we cannot use the law in our mission of the church. We obey the law when we follow Christ’s command to preach and teach the gospel to people. The gospel is also applied to people in the form of absolution after we call upon people to repent: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they not forgiven” (John 20:23). It is part of the church’s mission, wherever we are sent to preach repentance and forgiveness, that the law comes in. When we make disciples and ask them to obey what Jesus commanded us, we use both the law and the gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Therefore it is our mission to use the means of grace by preaching both the law and the gospel. When Jesus commissioned his disciples, he commanded them to “preach the gospel.” If people refuse to accept the good news of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, we must tell them that they are then under God’s judgment. In the Great Commission Jesus simply said his pastors should proclaim both the law and the gospel. So even today, it is our mission to preach and teach both law and gospel to all people. The law will convict sinners of their sinfulness, while the gospel promises and delivers forgiveness to the penitent. As we preach the law and the gospel, we should understand that they have something in common. In a wider sense the law and the gospel denote the entire revelation of God. In the narrower sense the law refers to God’s commands and the gospel is the glad tidings of God’s grace in Christ. Both the law and the gospel are the Word of God; they both pertain to all people; and both should be taught side by side in the church. But care should be observed as we apply the law and the gospel when carrying out the mission of the church because they serve different purposes (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 194).

When directing people to follow Jesus we apply the law. This is because in the law God tells us what we must do or may not do. One example is in the book of Matthew 22:37, where we are told: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This Jesus has told us we should do. Again in Exodus 20:3 the Bible tells us what we should not do; it says: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Therefore as we preach the good news to people, it is also our mission to share God’s law with them so that they know what should be done and not done to please God. The law is like a highway code which teaches all road users everything they need in order for them to use the road properly.

Jesus in his commission said, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). In his commission Jesus wants us to use the law to convict people of their sinfulness: “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). In our mission we use the law to warn people because the law reveals the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The law works fear of punishment, sorrow and regret, despair and hatred of God in the heart of man: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18). Once the law demands perfection from a sinner, he becomes desperate, just like someone drowning looks for a rescue team.

This is the stage at which we come in with the gospel to introduce the love of God and what God has done for that desperate person: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The gospel comes in with promises of grace and forgiveness: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . . For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17). The gospel comes to comfort those who are depressed because of their sins. It builds hope and confidence in the heart of the penitent sinner. It works faith and trust in God. It moves a believer to love God and his neighbor: “Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21).

From this we can see that in our mission as a church we must use both law and gospel. We can do this before and after conversion. We should use the law before conversion to show a person his sin and need for a Savior; after conversion we use the law with respect to Christian living. The regenerate person needs the law as a curb, as a mirror, and as a guide. This is what we call the threefold purpose of the law (*Luther’s Catechism*, pp. 49-51).

- A. The purpose of the law as a **curb** is to help preserve order in the world by keeping the wicked actions of all people within bounds: “My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws” (Psalm 119:120). “For although they are indeed reborn, and have been renewed in the spirit of their mind, such regeneration and renewal is incomplete in this world. In fact, it has only begun, and in the spirit of their mind the believers are in a constant war against their flesh (that is, their corrupt nature and kind), which clings to them until death. . . . It is necessary for the law of God constantly to light their way lest in their merely human devotion they undertake self-decreed and self-chosen acts of serving God. This is further necessary lest the Old Adam go his own self-willed way. He must be coerced against his own will not only by the admonitions and threats of the law, but also

by its punishments and plagues, to follow the Spirit and surrender himself a captive” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VI:4).

- B. God’s law as **mirror** shows all people their sins and their need of a Saviour: “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (Romans 7:7).
- C. God’s law as a **guide** tells Christians, surrounded by a sinful world, the way of life that is pleasing to God. As a guide, the law shows Christians in which works they should exercise their faith. The gospel conveys the power of the Holy Spirit which makes them able and willing to follow this guide and do these good works: “According to their inmost self they do what is pleasing to God not by coercion of the law but willingly and spontaneously from the heart by the renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI:23). This is the mission of the church.

The mission of the church is to administer the sacraments.

A sacrament is sacred act, ordained by God, wherein he, by certain external means connected with his word of the gospel, offers, conveys, and seals unto men the grace which Christ merited (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 198). In other words, a sacrament should have physical elements used in conjunction with the Word of God. By means of its gospel foundation, a sacrament strengthens a person’s faith by assuring them of the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins. The validity of the sacrament is solely dependent on the Word of God. Therefore we must take the words of institution in that sense and the meaning in which Christ used them. It is true that the sacraments get their strength from the gospel. That is why we confess in Luther’s Small Catechism: “It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water. . . . It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such things, but the words ‘Given’ and ‘poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins’” (*Luther’s Catechism*, pp. 9,14). As we do mission work, we should help people to understand this.

Administration of the sacraments is one of the missions of the church. This duty is found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus commanded us to baptise people. Jesus also commanded us to administer the Lord’s Supper in the Gospels. He said: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus commanded us to administer these sacraments because there are benefits in them. In the Lord’s Supper we receive the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, and eternal salvation. In Baptism all who believe receive the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. As Jesus promised, “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). These blessings are available to all, but they need to be received by faith: “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Hebrews 4:2). Performing these sacraments should not be a mere outward act; nor does their efficacy depend on the faith of the administrator:

Although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests

who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (Matthew 23:2).

Our churches condemn the Donatists and others like them who have denied that the ministry of evil men may be used in the church and who have thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and without effect (Augsburg Confession, Article VIII:1,3).

The Lutheran church believes and confesses that there are only two sacraments that should be administered according to God’s Word; these are Baptism and Lord’s Supper. We teach that there are two sacraments because a sacrament is a sacred act that unites visible elements with the promise of the forgiveness of sins according to Christ’s command. We are different from other denominations which have more than two sacraments. For example, the Catholics recognize more than two; they have the sacraments of Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction in addition to Baptism and Lord’s Supper. The first five do not qualify to be sacraments because they do not have the essential features of a sacrament.

To begin with, it is the mission of the church to administer the Sacrament of Baptism as commanded by Christ Jesus in the Great Commission: “baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). All those churches which have done away with Baptism or have distorted its biblical meaning nullify the command of Jesus and they violate the basic institution of the Christian church.

The Lutheran church believes that Baptism should be administered by the application of water; this can be done either by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. The mode of application is an adiaphoron:

Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive Baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God’s command and ordinance, so that, baptized in the name of God, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. This the hand cannot do, nor the body, but the heart must believe it. . . . The body has water poured over it, though it cannot receive anything but the water, and meanwhile the Word is spoken so that the soul may grasp it. . . . This act or observance consists in being dipped into the water, . . . which is simply the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man, both of which actions must continue in us our whole life long. . . . Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless be only one Baptism (Large Catechism, Baptism: 36, 45, 65, 78).

Some churches teach that unless a person is completely immersed in water, he is not baptised. Yet they have little to say about the spiritual benefit of Baptism and the significance of such immersion. They make much of the outward form and mode of Baptism. It is our mission to make sure that all are baptised: adults, youth, or infants. We should first instruct the adults and then baptise them; but with children, we baptise and then instruct them. In Matthew 28:19-20, we are told to make disciples of all nations for Christ. This is to be done by baptising and teaching

them. We make little children disciples of Christ through Baptism, and thereafter teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. This should be done with the consent of their parents.¹

Despite all this, our mission is to preach the gospel and administer the Sacrament of Baptism even to infants because the Bible makes it clear that little children belong to all nations, and the kingdom of God: “Let the little children come to me, . . . for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (Luke 18:16). “Our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through Baptism, and that children should be baptized, for being offered to God through Baptism they are received into his grace. Our churches condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the Baptism of children and declare that children are saved without Baptism” (Augsburg Confession, Article IX:1-3).

The Lord’s Supper is the second of the two sacraments which the church should faithfully administer. The Lord’s Supper is a divine and permanent institution which has to be practiced by the church until the end of time. According to the words instituting this sacrament, we recognize the bread and wine as visible elements, and the body and blood of Jesus as the heavenly elements. We confess with Luther in his Small Catechism where he says, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink” (*Luther’s Catechism*, p. 13).

As we carry out our mission of preaching the gospel through the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we should be mindful of the divergent doctrines which are taught by other churches. The Catholics teach *transubstantiation*. This means when Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he gave his disciples power to change the bread and wine into his body and blood. Catholics teach that even today when an ordained priest consecrates the bread and wine, they are changed (transubstantiated) into the body and blood of Jesus. They continue by affirming that once the bread and wine are consecrated and changed into the body and blood of Jesus, the bread and wine are no longer present.

Our Lutheran Confessions refute that:

“As for transubstantiation, we have no regard for the subtle sophistry of those who teach that the bread and wine surrender or lose their natural substance and retain only the appearance and shape of bread without any longer being real bread, for that bread is and remains there agrees better with the Scriptures, as St. Paul himself states, “The bread which we break” (1 Cor. 10:16), and again, “Let a man so eat of the bread” (1 Cor. 11:28) (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VI:5).

However, we read in 1 Corinthians 11:26-28: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.”

¹ NB. In some parts of the world, Africa in particular, we have a challenge in baptising infants. Many people in Africa believe that a child has to reach a certain age in order to be accepted as a human being. This makes it difficult for the church to baptise little babies. This gives some advantage to other churches like the Anabaptists who deny infant Baptism.

Even if the eating and drinking takes place after the consecration, the communicants still eat bread and drink wine because the above text says so. Therefore the bread and wine must still be present.

The Reformed church teaches *representation*. This teaching claims that the bread and wine *represent*, or signify, the true body and blood of Jesus, which is located in heaven. They teach that when partaking of the Sacrament the natural bread and wine are present, but the body and blood of Jesus are absent from the consecrated bread and wine. They assert that it is impossible for the body of Christ which is in heaven to be present everywhere on earth in the Sacrament. This raises the chief question:

In the Holy Communion are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ truly and essentially present if they are distributed with the bread and wine and if they are received orally by all those who use the sacrament, be they worthy or unworthy, godly or godless, believers or unbelievers, the believers for life and salvation, the unbelievers for judgment? The Sacramentarians say No; we say Yes (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VII:2).

According to their reason, they interpret the words of institution figuratively. However we cannot take the words “This is my body” to be figurative. “This” refers to nothing else than the bread which Christ gave to his disciples (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, pp. 116-118). The word “is” cannot be taken in a figurative sense to mean “represent” or “signify”; “is” should be “is” (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, pp. 106-115).

The Lutheran church furthermore does not agree with the teaching of *consubstantiation*. This teaching claims that the bread and body form one substance, or that the body is present like the bread in a natural manner. Nor do we (Lutherans) teach *impanation*, which means that the body of Christ is locally enclosed in the bread. When we use the words “in, with, and under the bread,” we are not explaining the sacramental union because it cannot be explained, but we are rejecting the papist transubstantiation” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 220).

The Lutheran church, on the basis of Scripture, teaches the “real presence” of Christ’s body and blood, which is received together with the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine are received in a natural way. In, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive the true body and blood of Christ in a supernatural way (in a way that we cannot understand because it is a miracle of God).

There are other faulty concepts regarding the means of grace, which are taught by certain churches such as the Catholics. The Catholics claim that the means of grace do help the individual who is responsible for working out his salvation. They (Catholics) say that the Holy Spirit assists a person by the infusion of God’s enabling grace through the sacraments. That grace, in turn, helps the person work towards furthering his justification.

In contrast, Lutherans believe what the Scriptures teach about justification. For example, in 1863 the American president, Abraham Lincoln, declared all slaves to be free. By this declaration, freedom from slavery was an accomplished fact. No one had to pay for it, or earn it. Of course,

the slave himself did not use this freedom until he heard about it and accepted it as his own. On the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, God declared the whole world to be justified: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25). By this act of God, all people were judged to be free from sin, and righteous before him: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This act of God’s grace is made known in the gospel, and this freedom from the slavery and consequences of sin becomes a person’s own when the person believes: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:17).

Another faulty concept concerning the means of grace is brought in by charismatic theology, which speaks about the operation of the Holy Spirit without the means of grace. We do not believe that. The Lutheran Confessions strongly insist that “we must condemn with all seriousness and zeal, and in no wise tolerate in the church of God, the enthusiasts who imagine that without means, without the hearing of the divine Word and without the use of the holy sacraments, God draws man to himself, illuminates, justifies, and saves him” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:80).

Luther writes in his treatise “Against the Heavenly Prophets”:

When God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, p. 146).

Certain branches of the Reformed theology turn the two around. They start with the inward and finish with the outward. Synergism is yet another faulty concept concerning the means of grace. This concept is commonly taught by Arminianism. Arminians claim that a man should cooperate with God to become a Christian. But the confessions reject this:

[We condemn . . .] The teaching of the synergists, who maintain that in spiritual things man is not wholly dead toward that which is good, but only grievously wounded and half-dead. . . . After the Holy Spirit . . . has called us . . . , then the free will by its own natural powers can meet God and . . . help and cooperate and prepare itself for the grace of God, . . . and by its own powers cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the continuation and preservation of this work within us. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:77)

In our mission of the church, through the distribution of the means of grace, it is important to understand the claims and implications of such religious material on the public market. Some of these materials include false teachings which can destroy people’s lives. We have the means of

grace (gospel) as a wonderful tool and a great treasure for the church. God has placed into our hands the means of grace to use as we carry out the mission of the church. The means of grace (gospel in Word and sacrament) will help us call people to eternal salvation:

God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and the wonderful counsel concerning our redemption, namely, the holy and only saving Gospel. . . . Thereby he gathers an eternal church for himself out of the human race and works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of their sins and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And it is God's will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way—namely, through his holy Word . . . and the sacraments (when they are used according to his Word). . . . All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and the hearing of God's Word are the Holy Spirit's instrument in, with, and through which he wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:50,52)

Charity work demonstrates our faith in the gospel.

In Mark 16:18, the Bible has assigned the church an extra responsibility in its mission. This passage says: "They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Jesus is here encouraging the church to lead a sanctified life of service to the needy as part of her mission of preaching the gospel. This means that believers are to bring forth such good works as fruits of their repentance. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). This should be done out of love and of course not in the desire to earn salvation.

As he demonstrated in his own ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus encourages the church to help the needy in society. This is what we call charity work, or humanitarian aid. Jesus thus asks us to use both hands when preaching the gospel. One hand has the spiritual food, while the other has physical food. We can see both hands in the commission of Mark 16:15-18: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. . . . They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

Jesus will assess our life of sanctification on judgment day: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, . . . take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you. . . . For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, . . . I needed clothes and you clothed me.'" (Matthew 25:34-36). Jesus used both hands when he preached and taught people on earth. He fed and healed thousands (Matthew 15:29-38). The book of James also encourages humanitarian work: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16).

Any kind deed done to help a person in his or her time of need is very important and can become a point of contact that the Christian uses to help touch a deeper need. Jesus used healing as a point of contact for the gospel. In Matthew 9:27-31, we read:

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to

him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Yes, Lord,” they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith will it be done to you”; and their sight was restored. . . . They went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

The church and all individual Christians should plan to meet the obvious needs of people with the intention of using that point of contact to bring the means of grace to people. Our mission fields need to have food aid and medical aid. This can help people all over the world hit by disasters like earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanoes, hurricanes, poverty, and disease. All these are points of contact for sharing the gospel.

Charity work can be done on an individual level, a congregational level, synod level, and an international level: “For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26). Humanitarian aid is a tool for evangelism. But this has to be done with care. Let me give you some examples from Africa (Zambia in particular): We have a board known as the Charities Board. Under this board we have a department called Health and Development. This department deals with the sinking of boreholes, caring for the sick, and adult literacy. We use these points of contact to share the gospel. When people come to draw water from a borehole, we take advantage of this opportunity to share the gospel with them. Home-based care givers also use that opportunity to spread the gospel. They do this during their time of visiting the sick. We do the same with literacy programs. This is not something new in the church. The Lord Jesus used such points of contact during his ministry here on earth.

However we have to be very careful so that we do not lose track of how to use the means of grace. The danger is that some false evangelists twist the gospel in their attempt to motivate their audience. They blind people by promising them money, power, and pleasure. They blind people from the saving light of Christ’s gospel. This is what we call the “social gospel.” Paul wrote about “men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain” (1 Timothy 6:5).

This social gospel has invaded the world. Many people are taking advantage of widespread poverty levels, disease, unemployment, and divorce in certain countries. These social ills have created a fertile ground for the social gospel. Preachers come in great numbers to preach about prosperity, deliverance, and marriage reunions. This has affected our churches such that we have lost a lot of members. This has led to the misunderstanding of the true gospel. People are now looking for an immediate worldly salvation: “For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear” (2 Timothy 4:3).

As Lutherans we should preach the gospel and use charity work to demonstrate our faith. Let humanitarian aid be the sign of our appreciation for what Christ did for us. It must be done as a response to the saving acts of God; it should not be treated as a means to salvation, but as a fruit of faith: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). We should do charity work because of our love for God: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

The ministry

In the commissioning of his church, Christ established the office of the preaching ministry. He wanted his church to faithfully preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. The Augsburg Confession defines the ministry of the church as this: “In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (Augsburg Confession, Article V:1). We see that the most important work of the church is to preach and teach the Word and to administer the sacraments. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in its doctrinal statement entitled, “Theses on the Church and Ministry” says: “Christ instituted one office in His Church, ‘the ministry of the Gospel’” (*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, p. 48).

1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” From this we see that every Christian is a priest of God. This means that every believer should tell others about the Saviour. According to 1 Peter 2:9, there are four titles given to believers. Believers are: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.” This means that the church is a special group of people dedicated to God. These titles should move every Christian to share with others. God is the one in charge of this group; he gives birth to this group, and he is in control of this priesthood of believers. The word “people” has in it the idea of being a family. The word “chosen” reminds us of the formation of this particular family as God’s initiating activity. Therefore all believers in Jesus Christ are God’s chosen people, chosen “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1 Peter 1:2). The church is a holy nation: this means we are set apart for a purpose. God has set us apart to lead a brand-new life of dedicated and consecrated service.

The church is a people belonging to God. As a church, we were bought at a price in order to belong to God: “You were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). This price is the blood of Jesus which was pure and without defect: “You were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19). Jesus made us who we are today—the holy people of God. Because of all that Jesus did, we do not have to be uncertain regarding our purpose as a church. The purpose of the church is to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. This is what God is looking for in his church: “the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise” (Isaiah 43:21). The Greek word “*euangello*” is an action word which has an idea of publishing, announcing, making known abroad, or proclaiming. This divinely-chosen group (the church) has to convey the message which it knows, the “mystery of God in Christ,” to outsiders. This is the mission of the church. The church should be dynamic not static. It is the responsibility of the church to tell the world about all the wonders of God which are his saving acts.

All believers have the responsibility to tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ. Members of the church are ordained for this task through Baptism. A church father of the fourth century, Jerome, said: “Baptism is the ordination of the laity” (Valleskey, *We Believe*, p. 149). Luther also maintained that passages like 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light,” mean that all Christians have the responsibility of preaching the gospel to others—of telling people about the grace of God in Christ. Luther goes

on to say: “No one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest. . . . But if it is true that they have God’s word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread [his word]” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 29, p. 309).

We have much evidence from the Scriptures, the church fathers, and the Lutheran Confessions that the mission of the church to preach the gospel is a responsibility of all believers. John Schaller, former president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wrote in his article about the origin and development of the New Testament ministry:

Our studies, which have adhered strictly to what is set forth in the Holy Scriptures, incontrovertibly show that the ministry, that is, the commission to preach the gospel, is given to every Christian; that at conversion not only the ability but also the impetus for this preaching is implanted in him; and that the gospel by its very nature as a *message* presupposes this preaching activity and at the same time by the effect it has guarantees it will occur. (Schaller, “The Origin,” p. 38).

The mission of the church is to spread the gospel as a group like the shepherds in Luke 2 did. Individuals can also tell others what they know about the gospel. A good example is the woman at Jacob’s well who told the people about Jesus: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did” (John 4:29). The church can benefit through individual ministries. This is where individual Christians serve as priests in their personal private lives. Whatever rights and duties Christians perform in their capacity as individual members of Christ’s royal priesthood, they act as private persons and not as public officials of the church. This is because Christians are to be the salt of the world. They can thus use their lips to talk about Christ: “But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region” (Matthew 9:31). Christians can talk about Jesus in various places like social gatherings, funerals, hospitals, and when visiting in their neighbourhoods. Christians use the gospel by “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The office of the public ministry

The office of the public ministry is where pastors and others act on the basis of a call they have received from their fellow Christians. A public minister acts under God, in the name of the congregation which called him. The Scriptures put it very clearly in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that everything should be done in an orderly way; it is therefore correct that certain functions of the ministry should be done by public ministers. Certain functions cannot be done by everybody at the same time without disorder and confusion. One example is the public preaching of the gospel in the worship service; another is administering the sacraments when the congregation is gathered together.

There are several functions of the ministry which require trained public ministers. This is why Jesus instituted the public ministry of the gospel. The public ministry not only deals with the public preaching of the gospel; it also administers the sacraments and carries out church discipline, including the excommunication of impenitent sinners from the congregation. This is so because no individual Christian can claim these responsibilities for himself or herself simply

because he or she is a member of the royal priesthood. In matters to do with the above functions, the entire congregation should act and act through its called minister.

Luther explains the ministry this way:

You should put the Christian into two places. First, if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so. . . . Second, if he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself. Instead, he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of others (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 39, p. 310).

Our Lutheran Confessions say: "Nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called" (Augsburg Confession, Article XIV). Most people are familiar with the pastoral office as the only form of public ministry, yet there are other forms of the public ministry; for example, in the Scriptures we read that there were apostles, prophets, elders/overseers, deacons, evangelists, and teachers. In the public ministry the church should have different public ministers to take on various tasks. This helps meet every need, situation, and circumstance. We need to know that the office of the public ministry is not man-made. It is a divine institution. God himself instituted the public ministry. The Scripture gives us evidence of this set up in Ephesians 4:11-12: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service."

Because of this divine institution of the public ministry, "wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists. Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers" (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 67). Since the mission of the church requires the public ministry, it is important that the church organizes all local congregations to call public ministers. Once these ministers are put in place, they strengthen the mission of the church. This is because the office of the public ministry administers the means of grace through which forgiveness and salvation are offered and conveyed to people. After the administration of the church is set up, the mission of the church becomes a running wheel. It moves into the entire world to preach the gospel.

The work of the public ministry is to nurture the flock. Christ has given spiritual leaders to his church to equip the saints so that they can serve the Lord, "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:12). It is the mission of the church to take care of the already existing flock, protect them from false teaching, guard, and guide the flock:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the

truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31).

The apostle Peter also speaks to the elders of the church in his letter, 1 Peter 5:1-4:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings. . . . Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers . . . ; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

The mission of the church goes beyond nurturing the existing flock. It includes the building up of both internal and external flocks. This means the office of the public ministry helps the church organise outreach programs. After managing its internal affairs, the church has to reach out to the unchurched. This is what we call "evangelism." We have to centre our evangelism programs on the means of grace. In so doing, we will give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to carry out his work of calling and gathering people, enlightening, and sanctifying them for holy lives and works of service.

The church should practice democracy in its distribution of the means of grace. This can be done through the use of the varied gifts that Christ has given to his church. We should joyfully serve the Lord according to our abilities and strive to be productive members of Christ's body the church:

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. . . . We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:1,2,6-8).

This is the mission of the church in full strength: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved" (Mark 16:16). "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). May the Lord of the church enable us through his Holy Spirit to carry out this mission faithfully to the glory of God—wherever in the world we may happen to serve him!

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Scripture quotations from New International Version (NIV).

Discussion Questions

1. In your culture, is the social gospel a significant threat? If so, tell how.
2. How do you balance the desire to make the world a better place versus the priority of preaching of the gospel?
3. To what extent is sharing the gospel to be done by the called clergy and to what extent by the lay people?
4. How do we encourage the laity to use their gifts in service of the mission of the church?
5. What if your church does not have enough pastors—how can the mission of the church be carried out?
6. What false teachings concerning the sacraments are present in your country?
7. What charitable works does your church engage in to the glory of God?
8. Has any aspect of the “mission of the church” been omitted from or neglected in this essay? If so, please point this out.