THE LUTHERAN CHURCH MISSOURI SYNOD
Commission on Theology and Church Relations

Apostolic Succession in Lutheran Theology

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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Introduction

Lutheran churches historically had — and today continue to have — different forms of structure and polity. One of the differences among Lutheran churches is the office of bishop. Some Lutheran churches have an office of bishop, others do not. Some Lutheran churches have an episcopal polity, others have a more congregational polity, and some churches have a polity that contains episcopal, presbyterial, consistorial and congregationalist elements.

The LCMS is in fellowship with many orthodox Lutheran churches that have different polities than the LCMS does. These differences are not church divisive, if the God-given rights of congregations and pastors are respected and if a specific polity is not made binding by divine right. Unlike many other denominations, confessional Lutheranism does not believe that there is a divinely instituted polity.[1]

Recently, there have been discussions in confessional Lutheranism regarding the office of bishop and the question of "apostolic succession"; that is, if the office of bishop as an office distinct from the pastoral office is necessary for the apostolicity of the church and if the bishop

[1] "The principle governing church polity is simply that the highest authority rests with the Christians. The execution of this authority is considered of secondary importance, since the only concern in determining church polity is whether the congregation is properly served with Word and sacrament. But whether the episcopal or the synodical form of government is adopted as of human right, the church in the strict sense is not an earthly monarchy under a visible head, but a communion of saints under Christ, whose highest law for faith and life is the Holy Scriptures" (F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America*, 4th ed., Rev. Arthur Carl Piepkorn [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961], 182). "Liberated by the Gospel for service to the Gospel, 'man' establishes ordinances in the church for examinations, ordinations, and installations, for the relationship of congregations, pastor, and church administrations for the unfolding of the functions of the *one* spiritual office in various offices arranged by the church, for the cooperation of the voice of the universal priesthood of believers in the activity of church administration, etc. The fact that the Confessions do not prescribe canonical rules for all these matters — though the church must have order in these matters if confusion is not to result — is felt as a lack and a weakness the moment the church has forgotten about the freedom of faith" (Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961], 252).

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has a special power that allows him to ordain pastors who through this episcopal ordination are able to preach and administer the Sacraments. In order to evaluate these issues, it is first necessary to discuss what is meant by the apostolicity of the church, then what a Lutheran understanding of the office of bishop is, and from there to answer the question of how Lutherans should view "apostolic succession."

This brief study is intended to express what The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) regards as a biblical and confessional Lutheran view of apostolicity, bishops and apostolic succession. With relatively few exceptions, these topics have not been at issue within our church body, nor are they at present. It is rather in conversation with and in relation to our many partner churches, especially those in lands influenced by Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy or Anglicanism, that the CTCR has become aware of disagreements and misunderstandings on this matter. We offer this document as an attempt to facilitate greater clarity and consensus on issues related to apostolic succession, lest they give cause for division. We hope it will serve to promote the unity of doctrine and fellowship in the faith that we share, that we might "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) that we have through our agreement in the Gospel, the Sacraments, and all the articles of the faith.

Apostolicity in Lutheran Theology

"I believe in one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church." In the Nicene Creed, apostolicity is one of the four attributes of the church. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians that they are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). The apostles are foundational for the church as the messengers commissioned and authorized by the risen Christ. Their specific and enduring significance for the church is also acknowledged in Revelation, where the names of the twelve apostles are inscribed on the foundation of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14). The apostles are unique in the sense that they were called by Christ and they have no successors: The office of apostle is not filled by anyone after their deaths.

In what sense does the church continue to be apostolic, even if there are no apostles preaching and teaching? The church is apostolic in being faithful to the apostolic teaching and preaching as given in the apostolic Scriptures — the New Testament writings. These writings are

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the extension of the apostolic office through the ages. That is the reason the Lutheran Confessions frequently use the expression "the prophetic and *apostolic* Scriptures"[2] for the Old and New Testament.

The apostolicity of the church consists in its continual adherence to the apostolic Scriptures and to the apostolic doctrine contained in these Scriptures. In adhering to the teaching of the apostles — that which Christ commanded the apostles to teach — the church is thereby also faithful to her Lord. It has pleased Christ to communicate His words to all generations after His ascension through the service of the apostles as His authorized messengers, and there is no access to Christ's Word without the apostles. Apostolicity is essential for the church because Christ builds and governs His church through His Word as it is given through the apostles.[3]

The church is therefore apostolic when it preaches the apostolic message of the Law and the Gospel given to the apostles by Christ. The church is apostolic "inasmuch as all its members to the Last Day come to faith in Christ through the Word of the Apostles (John 17:20) ... and cling to the Word of the Apostles (Acts 2:42) ... and this over against all departures from the truth of Scripture."[4]

Bishops in Lutheran Theology

Lutherans confess that Christ has instituted the office of preaching and administering the Sacraments (John 20; Matt. 28; AC V; AC XXVIII 5; Tr 31). There is only one office established by Christ.[5] Word and Sacrament belong together, therefore any separation of the two by establishing distinct offices that either only preach or only administer the Sacraments destroys

[2] Preface 2, 22, 23; Ap V 268; Ep Summary 1; SD Summary 3, 16. (Quotations are from the *Book of Concord: Reader's Edition* [Concordia Publishing House, 2007] unless otherwise noted.)
[3] The apostolicity of the church does not consist in imitating everything the apostles did. Certain apostolic mandates and customs that were made by the apostles for the church at their time are not binding on the church of later generations, such as the prohibition against consuming blood or the veiling of women in the church (cf. AC XXVIII 28, 54, 65–66), as the context of these mandates makes clear.
[4] Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 411.
[5] LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Ministry* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981), 19. Also see C.F.W. Walther's eighth thesis on the ministry: "The pastoral ministry [*Predigtamt*] is the highest office in the church, and from it stem all other offices in the church" (Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. J.T. Mueller [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987], 289).

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the unity of the one office. Since there is only one office, there is also no divinely established hierarchy where certain office holders have intrinsic authority over other holders of the office (Tr 11, 60–61).

Churches have made distinctions between office holders, especially when more than one pastor is serving in a congregation — for example, between senior pastor, associate and assistant pastor, visitation pastor, and the like. These distinctions are by human right and for good order only.[6] By human right and for good order, churches have also established trans-congregational offices.[7] In the LCMS, that includes district presidents, circuit visitors and Synod presidents; in other Lutheran churches, it may include bishops, deans, superintendents or provosts. The only trans-congregational office that is divinely instituted, however, is the apostolate. After the death of the apostles, that divinely established office in the church no longer exists.

Neither is there a single, specific, divinely instituted office or function of oversight in the church. The English word "bishop" is derived from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means "overseer." The New Testament uses the word *episkopos* five times (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25). First Peter 2:25 refers to Christ, not to ministers in the church. Acts 20:28 uses the terms *presbyteros* ("elder") and *episkopos* interchangeably. In Titus 1:5, Paul talks about the office of elder and then moves without a break to talk about the *episkopos*. Additionally, the qualifications for overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and elder in Titus 1:5–9 are very

[6] Human right (*de iure humano*) means something that is not established or required in the New Testament but may be adopted for peace and good order in the church (1 Cor. 14:33, 40). This is contrasted with divine right (*de iure divino*), which is something explicitly established or required by the New Testament. While church polity, or the precise structure and governance in our churches, may be by human right, many other things in the church clearly are by divine right, including the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Sacraments, the exercise of the Keys through both absolution and excommunication (among others forms of loosing and binding) and, of course, the pastoral office and the orderly examination, call and ordination of men into that office. For a brief summary of these non-negotiable features, see LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Mission and Ministry Principles and Practical Observations and Suggestions* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2024).

[7] "Concerning this subject we have frequently testified in the assembly that it is our greatest desire to retain the order of the church and the various ranks in the church — even though they were established by human authority" (Ap XIV 1; Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000], 222; subsequently abbreviated "KW").

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similar. These two passages do not reveal any difference in the duties of elder and overseer.[8] There is no indication that the overseers had any oversight on a trans-congregational level.

> What are overseen by "overseers" in the New Testament, when the noun is used, are *not* other leaders. Rather, it is the sheep themselves. This can be seen in Acts 20:28: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you *as overseers, to engage in shepherding* (ποιμαίνειν, present infinitive) the church of God." *One oversees by acting as a shepherd among the people whom God has commended to one's charge, not by overseeing others doing the work of shepherding*.[9]

It seems that both Timothy and Titus had some trans-congregational duties. Neither is, however, ever called *episkopos* in the New Testament. Only later tradition calls them bishops. Even if the trans-congregational duties of Timothy and Titus go back to an arrangement made by the apostle Paul, this does not establish that such a structure is by divine right.[10] Additionally, the New Testament does not indicate if such a structure of trans-congregational oversight was present everywhere in the church at the time.

In the post-apostolic church, the so-called "monarchical episcopate" developed. These monarchical bishops were no longer the same as elders, nor were there several of them in a congregation (as appears to be the case in Acts 20:28 and Phil. 1:1). Rather, a bishop became the leader of a congregation and later overseer of several congregations. This development led to the modern understanding of bishop as a regional overseer of churches. As a result, the unity of the

[8] Cf. LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Deacons, Evangelists, and the Office of the Holy Ministry in the New Testament* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2025), 8–9.
[9] "2013 Res. 4-06A Task Force Report to the Synod," *2016 LCMS Convention Workbook* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2016), 238.
[10] Cf. Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On the Ministry, Part Two* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 57: "Even if Bellarmine had proved that the apostles themselves had established a distinction between bishops and presbyters such that the power to ordain along with overseeing the rest of the presbyters should be committed to bishops but not to presbyters — which some people think can be gathered with likelihood from Titus 1:5, where this province is entrusted to Titus, bishop of the Cretans, 'that he might establish presbyters town by town' — nevertheless it would not yet be proved that bishops are greater than presbyters *by divine right*, for that regulation of the apostles would be just a part of ecclesiastical good order, not a precept of divine right."

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one office was lost and a threefold office (bishop, presbyter, deacon) came into being, which was regarded as divinely instituted. The bishop had the fullness of the office. He alone had the authority and power to ordain presbyters and deacons. The bishop was by divine right the supervisor of the clergy and the congregations in his diocese. Presbyters and deacons were obliged to obey the bishop by divine right.

This deviation from biblical teaching on the public office was reversed in the Lutheran Reformation. Lutheran theology restored the biblical view that God instituted one office: the office of preaching and administering the Sacraments. Thus, there is no difference by divine right between pastors and bishops. Rather, such distinctions are by human right.[11]

The Augsburg Confession and the Apology conceded that the Lutherans were willing to retain the established order — and with it an episcopal polity and episcopal office — for the sake of the unity of the church, provided that the bishops would ordain Lutheran candidates and not persecute the Gospel. Thus, they agreed that bishops could ordain presbyters. The Augsburg Confession and the Apology were clear, though, that the distinction between bishop and presbyter is by human right and that the duties of a bishop by divine right are no different than the duties of a pastor: "Consequently, according to divine right it is the office of the bishop to preach the gospel, to forgive sin, to judge doctrine and reject doctrine that is contrary to the gospel, and to exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose ungodly life is manifest — not with human power but with God's Word alone."[12] After the German bishops were not willing to ordain Lutherans, Lutheran pastors were ordained by other pastors, beginning in Wittenberg in 1535. Melanchthon articulated the theological rationale for this in his Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope.

[11] The biblical teaching was not entirely forgotten. Canonists (scholars of church law) had discussed in the Middle Ages if it was by divine or human right that presbyters could not ordain. Even popes granted as a privilege to certain abbots who were in presbyterial orders the right to ordain priests in their monasteries (Heinrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum: A Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. [(San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012], no. 1145–1146; 1290. This volume will be subsequently abbreviated as "DH.") Cf. also Lawrence N. Crumb, "Presbyteral Ordination and the See of Rome," *Church Quarterly Review* 164 (1963): 19–31.
[12] AC XXVIII 21 (KW, 94).

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In Germany, virtually no Roman Catholic bishops joined the Reformation.[13] There were a few attempts to establish a Lutheran episcopate. Luther himself consecrated Nicolaus von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg in 1542. Since Luther was ordained as a priest, not a bishop, the fact that he consecrated a bishop was in itself a break with the tradition of the early and medieval church. There were other Lutheran bishops in Germany in the 16th century, but this did not constitute an established office in the Lutheran churches. Certain episcopal duties were taken up by princes or magistrates as the preeminent members of the church, and these secular rulers were termed "emergency bishops." Ecclesiastical supervision was also exercised by superintendents (pastors who, in addition to their call to a parish, also had duties of regional oversight) and consistories who ultimately reported to the princes or magistrates.[14]

In Denmark, all Roman Catholic bishops were deposed when the Reformation was introduced. New bishops were appointed by King Christian III and consecrated by Johannes Bugenhagen, who himself was a pastor, not a bishop. This, too, demonstrated that the office of pastor and bishop were not of a different kind in Lutheranism, but rather distinctions by human arrangement in the same office.

There was, therefore, in Germany and in Denmark, a break from apostolic succession as a succession of bishops consecrated by bishops. Theologically, this was not a problem because of their understanding of the one divinely established office.

In Sweden, episcopal polity continued in a state church system. Sweden was the only Lutheran country in which there was a continuity in episcopal consecrations from the medieval times to the Reformation; hence, the Church of Sweden claims for itself "apostolic succession."

Historically, however, the Church of Sweden taught that the distinction between bishops and pastors is a matter of human right and that pastors do not need to be ordained by a bishop in "apostolic succession" to be in the preaching office.[15]

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[13] For a concise, but comprehensive treatment of the topic within Lutheran history, see Carl S. Meyer, "Apostolicity and Ministry: A Lutheran View," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 43 no. 2 (1972), 77-93.
[14] For examples of these, see the 1528 "Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony," in *Luther's Works: American Edition* 40:269–320, esp. 313–314 on the *Pfarrherr*; and Martin Chemnitz and Jacob Andreae, *Church Order for Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), esp. 169–193.
[15] For the author of the Swedish Church Order of 1571, Laurentius Petri, episcopacy "constituted the *bene esse* of the Church." See Martii Parvio, "The Post-Reformation Developments of the Episcopacy in Sweden, Finland, and

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In the 20th century, the Church of Sweden entered into intercommunion with the Church of England since both churches have "apostolic succession," though the Church of Sweden at that time did declare that the office of bishop was not by divine right.[16] The so-called "Porvoo Agreement" in 1992 declared full fellowship between the Church of Sweden and other Lutheran churches that derive their episcopacy from the Church of Sweden and the Church of England.[17]

Today, there are many Lutheran churches that have bishops. Some of them are bishops who claim "apostolic succession." These bishops exercise functions that are traditionally assigned to bishops: ecclesiastical supervision and ordination of pastors. In certain churches that have bishops, these functions are also exercised by superintendents that have "mid-level" responsibilities. Churches that do not have bishops, like The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, have established structures of ecclesiastical supervision to serve the pure preaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the Sacraments. In the LCMS, the Synod president and the district presidents exercise such ecclesiastical supervision.[18] Since there is no divinely established form for ecclesiastical supervision, churches are free to decide how best to ensure that doctrine remains pure and good order is upheld in the church. Scripture does not institute a specific office of bishop, yet it does require oversight or supervision by (and of) the one, divinely instituted pastoral office. How the church chooses to carry out this oversight practically and structurally is a matter of freedom. Oversight is biblically necessary, however, not optional. To claim that a church does not have legitimate oversight because it does not have a specific office of bishop is to deny that it is a biblical church.

the Baltic States," in *Episcopacy in the Lutheran Church? Studies in the Development and Definition of the Office of Church Leadership*, ed. Ivar Asheim and Victor R. Gold (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 128.

[16] Parvio, "Post-Reformation Developments," 135.

[17] For a critical evaluation of this agreement, see *The Porvoo Statement and Declaration in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, July 1999).

[18] Although the Constitution and Bylaws of the LCMS do not use the nomenclature of bishop, some districts in the LCMS have decided to refer to their district president as bishop. Additionally, vicarage supervisors are often colloquially called bishops.

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Apostolic Succession in Lutheran Theology[19]

The term "apostolic succession" can have a variety of meanings. Understood a certain way, it can mean the succession of doctrine in the church that comes from the apostles —having the same meaning as the apostolicity of the church. This understanding is entirely consistent with Lutheran theology. A more widespread or typical meaning of "apostolic succession" is used in connection with the doctrine of the ministry. According to this latter sense, "apostolic succession" means that the office of pastor (presbyter, priest) comes from the apostles themselves and that an unbroken chain of authority has been conferred from the time of the apostles to the present, through which certain qualities or authorities are transmitted to men ordained into the pastoral office by a bishop. Most often it relates to a conception of the office of bishop, distinct from the office of presbyter/pastor (and deacon), where the bishop has unique powers and authority stemming from the apostles. Thus, the teaching of apostolic succession and the teaching that there is a divinely established threefold office (bishop, presbyter, deacon) often go hand in hand.

The teaching of apostolic succession holds a significant place in much of Christendom. In 2000, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published a document on the "Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church," also known according to its first two words in Latin as "*Dominus Iesus*." There, it is stated: "On the other hand, the Ecclesial Communities that have not preserved the valid episcopate and the genuine and integral substance

[19] The question of apostolic succession has not been addressed specifically by CTCR documents, in part because apostolic succession has not been a source of controversy in the Missouri Synod since the formation of the Commission in 1962 — as it had not been for the greater part of the church body's history. The two seminaries (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; and Concordia Theological Seminary, then Springfield, Ill.) issued a joint statement in 1962 by request of the convention of the LCMS in 1959: "Apostolic Succession," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 33 (1962): 224–228. Francis Pieper has several short statements in his *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953): "The endeavor of the Romanists and the Anglicans to derive the Apostolic character of the church from the 'Apostolic Succession' has correctly been termed childish folly. Because Scripture (a) makes no distinction between bishops and teaching elders or pastors (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7) and (b) tells us to avoid all teachers who depart from the Apostolic Gospel, no matter whether they are called bishops, elders, or otherwise (Rom 16:17; Gal 1:6–8)" (p. 411–12). And: "Astounding things are taught about ordination within visible Christendom. ... The Episcopalians, needless to say, omit the Pope; none the less they insist upon it that legitimate bishops, priests, and deacons, whose administration of the functions of the ministry is valid, can be made only by bishops of an uninterrupted Apostolic Succession ordaining them" (p. 455–456).

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of the Eucharistic mystery are not Churches in the proper sense."[20] For the Roman Catholic Church, a valid episcopate — and that includes the understanding of the episcopate as an office distinct from the presbyterate/pastor by divine right — is essential for being church. Hence, the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges only those denominations as true churches that it judges to have this valid episcopate, namely the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Oriental Orthodox churches, but not the Anglican churches and not Lutheran churches, even those that have bishops and claim apostolic succession.[21] The Roman Catholic Church, for its part, claims there is an uninterrupted chain from the apostles through bishops by which a special gift is transmitted that becomes a permanent quality in the priest and by which the ordination of presbyters/pastors who can celebrate the Sacraments is made possible. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church's *Lumen Gentium* of the Second Vatican Council stated it thus in 1964:

> For the discharging of such great duties, the apostles were enriched by Christ with a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit coming upon them [*cf. Acts 1:8; 2:4: Jn 20:22f.*], and they passed on this spiritual gift to their helpers by the imposition of hands [*cf. 1. Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6f*], and it has been transmitted down to us in episcopal consecration. And the sacred council teaches that by episcopal consecration the fullness of the sacrament of orders is conferred, that fullness of power, namely, which both in the Church's liturgical practice and in the language of the Fathers of the Church is called the high priesthood, the supreme power of the sacred ministry. ... Therefore it pertains to the bishop to admit newly elected members into the episcopal body by means of the sacrament of orders."[22]

[20] *Dominus Iesus*, no. 17 (DH 5088).
[21] According to Pope Leo XIII's Apostolic Letter *Apostolicae curae et caritatis* (September 13, 1896), Anglican ordinations for the priesthood and the episcopacy are "absolutely null and utterly void" because in the 16th century the words spoken in the ordination liturgies did not explicitly state that the rite was to ordain priests and bishops, and thus the chain of ordinations ended (DH 3315–3319).
[22] Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 21 (DH 4145). That the bishops have the sole power to ordain priests was dogmatized at the Council of Trent (See "Doctrine and Canons of the Sacrament of Orders," July 15, 1563 [DH 1768, 1777]).

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The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) states: "Since the sacrament of Holy Orders is the sacrament of the apostolic ministry, it is for the bishops as the successors of the apostles to hand on the 'gift of the Spirit,' 'the 'apostolic line.' Validly ordained bishops, i.e. those who are in the line of apostolic succession, validly confer the three degrees of the sacrament of Holy Orders."[23]

According to Roman Catholic teaching, where there are no bishops, there are no presbyters/priests, and without them, there is no Lord's Supper. "Only validly ordained priests can preside at the Eucharist and consecrate the bread and wine so that they become the Body and Blood of the Lord."[24]

Besides Roman Catholicism and the churches recognized as true churches by them, there are other churches that have bishops and claim to have apostolic succession. In Anglicanism, there are a variety of opinions about what the practice of having bishops, presbyters and deacons, and the teaching that only bishops may ordain, means. There are those whose view is identical or very close to the Roman Catholic teaching, sometimes understanding apostolic succession as belonging to the "*esse*," or the essential being of the church. There is also the position that apostolic succession and episcopacy belong to the good order and well-being of the church, the "*bene esse*," but not to the substance of the church. There are also Anglicans who refer to it as an expression of the "*plene esse*" — or the full being — of the church, though not necessary to be considered a church, or in some cases to share communion fellowship.[25]

As mentioned before, among Lutherans there are churches that have bishops in apostolic succession, that is, bishops ordained by bishops that can trace their line back to the Early Church; but these bishops are not recognized as such by the Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodox churches. All of these bishops are connected to the Swedish Lutheran bishops after the Reformation. There are other Lutheran churches that have an office of bishop but without any claim to apostolic succession, for example, the Lutheran Church of Nigeria, *Selbständige*

[23] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1576 (subsequently abbreviated "CCC").
[24] CCC, no. 1411.
[25] See the section on the ministry in *On Closer Acquaintance: An Interim Report on the Ecumenical Dialogue between the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), and Lutheran Church—Canada (LCC)* (ACNA, LCMS, and LCC, 2016).

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Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche (SELK) in Germany, and the Spanish Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Besides apostolic succession as it is understood in the Roman Catholic sense, there is also the concept of a presbyteral succession. Presbyteral succession denies a divinely established difference between presbyter and bishop but agrees with Rome that the authority/power of the presbyter comes through a special gift that is handed down from the apostles through the laying on of hands. Both tie the apostolicity of the church to that chain. Both are wrong.[26]

Churches that teach the necessity of apostolic succession see it as the guarantee that the ecclesiastical office exists in the church and that the Means of Grace are validly administered. The office holder, in this understanding, needs to have certain powers or qualities that have been transmitted since the apostolic age by those who can transmit these powers — the apostles and their successors, the bishops. Only a person who has received such qualities can administer the Sacraments. There are serious theological problems with this view. First, it makes the Sacraments dependent on a quality inherent in the office holder. The Sacraments are no longer solely constituted by Christ's institution but are co-constituted by the office holder. Second, the church has no promise that in ordination powers or qualities are communicated to make the office holder able to "make" the Sacrament. Third, Christ neither commanded the laying on of hands nor gave a promise connected with the laying on of hands.[27]

The question of apostolic succession also touches on the relationship of the Means of Grace to the pastoral office. The preaching of the Gospel, Baptism, absolution and the Lord's Supper

[26] The proponents for presbyteral succession argue also from the historical point that it was not clear in the medieval Latin church if the difference between presbyter and bishop was by divine right or just a difference of canon law.
[27] "It is also worthy of consideration that when the apostles wanted to apply some outward rite in ordination, they did not take the visible sign of breathing on the ordinand, which Christ had used — lest people think that Christ had given a command about using the rite of breathing on them. Therefore, they took another rite, one indifferent and free, namely, the rite of laying on of hands, for they did not want to impose something on the church as necessary concerning which they did not have a command of Christ. Now the ministry of the Word and the sacraments has divine promises, and the prayer at ordination rests on these, but these promises are not to be tied to the rite of the imposition of hands, about which there is neither a command of Christ nor such a promise as there is about Baptism and the Lord's Supper" (Martin Chemnitz, *The Examination of the Council of Trent, Part II* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978], 695). Cf. also *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932), no. 33: "Regarding ordination we teach that it is not a divine, but a commendable ecclesiastical ordinance"; and Thesis VI of C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, trans. J.T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1987), 247.

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are Means of Grace; that is, Christ gives through them all that He has gained on the cross, namely forgiveness of sins with all the resultant gifts of grace.[28] The Means of Grace communicate the forgiveness of sins through faith because of their institution by Christ. When the institution of Christ is followed, there is a Means of Grace. Neither the existence nor the efficacy of these Means of Grace depends on an ecclesiastical office, but on the command and promise of Christ. The objective nature of the Means of Grace entails that the pastoral office, which is established by God to publicly administer the Means of Grace, does not constitute the existence or efficacy of the Sacrament.

The Gospel delivered through the Means of Grace is a proclamation of the free forgiveness of sins because of Christ's death and resurrection. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16) — a power inherent *in the Gospel itself* and not in any way derived from the one who proclaims that Gospel. Baptism saves because it is instituted by Christ as the application of water in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is not the speaking of a man that brings about the sacramental union of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, but the speaking of Christ.[29]

This is not to deny that the pastoral office was instituted to administer the Means of Grace publicly, but rather to deny that this office contributes anything to the Means of Grace apart from their proper administration according to Christ's institution.[30] The call of the pastor is to administer the Means of Grace, not to "make" them.[31] The preaching of the Gospel and the Sacraments themselves are the Means of Grace, not the person of the bishop/pastor.

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[28] SA III 4.

[29] "In this question, we have reached the following unanimous, amicable agreement among ourselves, namely, that no human words or works create the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Supper, whether it be the merit of the speaking of the minister or the eating and drinking or the faith of the communicants. Instead, all this should be ascribed solely to the almighty power of God and to the words, institution, and arrangement of our Lord Jesus Christ" (FC SD VII 74 [KW, 606]).

[30] See Walther's Thesis IV on the ministry: "The ministry [*Predigtamt*] is not a special or, in opposition to that of ordinary Christians, a more holy state, as was the Levitical priesthood, but it is a ministry of service [*Amt des Dienstes*]" (Walther, *Church and Ministry*, 198).

[31] "The holy place or church teaches that neither priests nor Christians produce a single sacrament; even the holy Christian church itself does not do so. Our office is called and ought to be not one of producing or effecting conversion but solely one of offering and bestowing. ... Thus there remains nothing for the office of the ministry or the office of preaching other than this single work, namely, to bestow or to present the gospel which Christ commanded to be preached. ... So, too, it is not by our doing, speaking, or work that bread and wine become Christ's body and blood, much less is it by the chrism or consecration, rather, it is caused by Christ's ordinance, command,

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The church as the assembly of believers around the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments according to the institution of Christ is therefore created and sustained by the Means of Grace, but it is not a Means of Grace or Sacrament in itself. This is obscured by the Roman Catholic view of the church as Sacrament. The Second Vatican Council called the church "the universal sacrament of salvation."[32] The language of the church as sacrament runs the risk of suggesting that the Sacraments depend on the church and not on the institution of Christ.[33] Rather, the church depends on the Means of Grace and is the "creature of the Word" (*creatura verbi*).

The succession of bishops historically does not validate ordination, the pastoral office or the administration of the Means of Grace. Episcopal ordination, like the office of bishop itself, is not biblically necessary, but may be practiced by human arrangement for the sake of peace and good order in the church. Where either apostolic succession (as it is historically defined) or episcopal ordination are considered biblically or confessionally mandated by partner Lutheran churches, doctrinal agreement, and therefore church fellowship, is in peril.

Lutheran churches that have bishops in apostolic succession in the sense of a succession of consecrations and hold to the apostolic faith can see this succession as a symbol of the continuity of the apostolicity of the church. It is never more than a symbol. It does not guarantee the apostolicity of the church. This is shown by the fact that the vast majority of bishops that are in this apostolic succession belong to heterodox churches. Apostolic succession has not prevented the Church of Sweden from falling into heterodoxy, nor the Episcopal Church USA from becoming what it is today. Neither is episcopal apostolic succession necessary to guarantee that a church has the office instituted by Christ. When a church teaches episcopal apostolic succession as something that is necessary to be truly church, such a church has left the apostolic faith. In its claim to be apostolic, it has lost apostolicity.

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and institution" (Martin Luther, "The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priest" in *Luther's Works: American Edition* 38:198–199).

[32] Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 48 (DH 4168). Cf. also CCC, no. 774

[33] Pope Pius XII actually stated in his encyclical "*Mediator Dei*" in 1947 that the effectiveness of the sacraments is by the act itself, but if one looks at the part the church takes in the action of the sacraments, then it is due to the action of the church (DH 3844).

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