

Why the Apostolic Succession Debate Matters  
by  
Rev. Heath R. Curtis  
Trinity Lutheran Church – Worden, IL  
Zion Lutheran Church – Carpenter, IL

**Introduction**

Like many men of my calling I am a collector of literary portraits of clergymen. It is instructive and enjoyable to glimpse how the world views us. Incumbents of the Office of the Ministry on page and film are variously portrayed - from good and wise Father Dowling to the more dynamic Mr. Ecko. But my favorite – and I would challenge anyone to disprove my veracity in saying that this is also simply the best portrayal in all of literature – is “Raymond Thomas Montrose, doctor of divinity, rector of the Church of the Holy Ghost.” Fr. Montrose, an Episcopal priest, is the center of Russel Kirk’s story *The Invasion of the Church of the Holy Ghost*. I will let him introduce himself,

*Thomas is my confirmation name, and my patron is Saint Thomas of Canterbury. Like my patron, I stand six feet four in my armor. Yes, armor; but my mail is black leather, and I sleep with a pistol hanging from my bedhead. A sergeant’s son, I was born in Spanish Town Jamaica, and I am shiny black: nobody excels me in negritude. The barmaids of Pentecost Road say I have a ‘cute British accent.’ I believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; the resurrection of the dead; and the life everlasting. I am celibate, not quite forty years of age, and since my ordination chaste of body. I have survived in Hawkhill a whole year.*

Needless to say, you should read this story. But for now, I call your attention to the following scene. Fr. Montrose serves in the inner city and night walks the streets of Hawkhill seeking to aid the runaways forced into prostitution. We join him as he enters a bar, the Mustang:

*Just outside the door of the Mustang someone has gripped my arm – but not with the customary imaginative ‘Want to have some fun, honey?’ This person was saying, ‘Brother, have you been washed in the blood of the Lamb?’*

*I swung round. It was a young black man, fantastically dressed, a street preacher, wild-eyed. He had a companion. This colleague, seated in a sort of primitive wheelchair was paler than death ... He then plucked the white boy out of his chair and exhibited him at arm’s length to the street-people. Praise be, the pallid thing was an inanimate manikin, marvelously realistic, after all. ...*

*‘Cept you take the Lord for your personal saviour, you’re no better’n this here dummy!’ the wild-eyed preacher was shouting. ‘Where you goin’ to spend eternity? You want to spend it with the Whore o’ Babylon and the Beast, whose number is six six six? The wages of sin is death. You want to be like this here dummy, no brains in your head? You want to be cast into the fire eternal? ‘Cept you follow the Lord Jesus, Ol’ Man Death put his bony hands on you, and you curl up like a worm. ...’*

*Two mighty hands took me by the shoulders, from behind. Their clutch was terribly painful; a shock like electricity ran through me. ‘Gottcha, Doc!’ said Fork. ‘You came along with me into this hell on earth they call the Mustang. Wahoo!’*

*[The blind man’s] ears has singled me out in the crowd by my few words in report to the street-preacher.*

*‘In a minute, Fork, you Beast from the Abyss,’ I muttered.*

*With his stick tucked under his arm, the blind man stood beside me, listening to the crazy preacher. ‘It always was a scandal, that faith, eh, Doc?’ He poked me in the ribs*

*with the head of his stick. 'That there reaving and ranting fellow – sort of like a caricature of you, eh, Doc?'*

*'Go to hell, Fork,' I told him.*

More powerfully than any essay, this scene, and the story as a whole, goes to the core of the question that keeps Lutheran pastors up at night: legitimacy. Fr. Montrose is moved to cursing because in the person of the street-preacher he has faced his greatest nightmare vision: himself as an impostor. Are we, when fantastically dressed in our vestments on Sunday morning ranting and raving about sin and grace and the pope as Antichrist – are we but a caricature of real priests? Jeremiah condemns those prophets who run when they are not called. Are we sure that we are called by God to our ministry – or are we the next thing to self-appointed charlatans: that is, those appointed by the self-appointed charlatans and schismatics of the 16<sup>th</sup> century?

This is exactly the charge leveled against us by Rome and the Eastern Orthodox when they speak of our lack of apostolic succession. In this essay I will examine what exactly they are claiming, to provide a critique of contemporary replies to the charge, and offer what I hope to prove is the proper scriptural and confessional defense of Lutheran apostolicity.

### **Apostolic Succession in Rome and the East**

While they are not in full fellowship, Rome and the Eastern Orthodox do recognize each other's ministry and sacraments because they recognize each other as apostolic churches. What do they mean by this? We can state the notion of apostolic succession in a general way as follows: The bishops of their respective churches were placed into their office properly by other holders of that office, and they in turn were placed into that office by other holders of that office, and so on back to the Apostles and Christ himself.

Why do Rome and the East deny that we as Lutherans (or even the Anglicans, who do claim to possess apostolic succession in just this sense) have this apostolicity? Because in both Rome and the East, the Office of the Ministry is seen as fully and truly present only in the bishop. It is the bishop who possesses all the rights and duties of the Office Christ gave his Apostles, including the right and duty to place other men into that Office. Priests and deacons are only given part of the Office which Christ gave to his Apostles. Specifically, a priest is not given the power to ordain other men into the Office and the deacon is further deprived of the ability to confect the Sacrament of the Altar.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation the pope and the bishops faithful to him refused to ordain clergy for the regions that followed the Augsburg Confession. Subsequently, men were called by the church in those jurisdictions (whether through the ruler, a town council, or an actual congregation) to be ministers and were placed into the office by other priests, not bishops. Since Rome and the East claim that the priest lacks exactly that power to put others into this office, the line back to Christ and the Office he gave to the Apostles was broken. Our ministers are thus not ministers, but imposters like Kirk's wild-eyed street preacher.

### **Inadequate Lutheran Responses**

Contemporary Lutheran responses to this charge have, in my opinion, confused refusing to debate on your opponents ground with refusing to debate at all. It is clear that we cannot rebut this charge on the theological ground of Rome and the East. They have their facts straight: during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation there was a break with episcopal ordination in the sense that there was a break with the bishops recognized by Rome as bishops. It is simply folly to claim, as the Anglicans have claimed, that we really do have apostolic succession under Rome's definition of

the terms. Lutherans must therefore look for other replies that do not operate under the assumption of Rome and the East.

The reply of many Lutherans today is that succession in office simply does not matter. The theological move attempted here is to AC VII. The Church is where the Word is rightly preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered thereto. The correct doctrine is rightly preached among us and the sacraments are rightly administered among us. *Quod erat demonstrandum*: we are certainly in the true Church. So Herman Sasse writes, “Authentic apostolic succession, then, is always and only the succession of doctrine.”<sup>1</sup> Kurt Marquart agrees, “There is of course a true apostolic succession, but it has little to do with external connections (Mk. 9:38-40!) to privileged places, persons, or hands. Instead it has everything to do with the faithful transmission of evangelical, sacramental substance – and only with that.”<sup>2</sup>

This reply at first strikes Lutheran ears as pious and wholly confessional. After all, that is what AC VII says, isn't it? But place this reply in front of those who have made this charge, and they are likely to point out that it is *petitio principii* – a begging of the question. That is, the reply assumes in the premises what needs to be proved in the arguments. For what does AC VII actually say? The sacraments must be “administered in conformity to the divine Word” (KW translation of *die Sakramente dem göttlichen Wort gemäzt gereicht warden*). And does not Article XIV state that no one may teach or administer the sacraments unless properly called? Thus, if our priests are not properly called to their office, then we are not administering the sacraments in accord with the divine Word and are thus not achieving what is *satis* for the existence of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Apostolic Succession,” *We Confess the Church*, trans. Norman Nagel, (St. Louis: CPH, 1986) pp. 84-107, 94.

<sup>2</sup> *The Church and her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*. Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics Series, vol. IX, Robert Preus, ed. (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 1990) 28.

Church. By our own confessional standards, then, if we are without the Office of the Ministry, without men *rite vocatus*, then we are without the Church.

### **Critiquing Sasse's Reply**

The charge that we lack ministers because we lack apostolicity, therefore, deserve more than a one sentence reply that merely asserts our purity of doctrine. And Sasse does attempt to provide such a reply in the essay from which I quoted above – although I do not think it is unfair to state that the cornerstone of his reply is the one sentence which I have just shown to be inadequate. Over the course of two essays in the *We Confess the Church* anthology (“Ministry and Congregation,” July 1949, pp. 69-83 and “Apostolic Succession,” April 1965, pp. 84-107) Sasse brings forward at least four other arguments in reply to the charge of non-apostolicity leveled against Lutheranism by Rome and the East.

Before critiquing these replies in turn, it is instructive to look at the introduction Sasse gives to his essay titled, “Apostolic Succession.” There he laments the sad case of what we might call apostolic anxiety disorder on the Lutheranism of his day. With Anglicans and Nordic Lutheran Churches harping on the necessity of their brand of apostolic succession and even secretly ordaining German Lutherans (86), it is little wonder that Sasse wished to combat this disorder forcefully. He was right to combat it – but the treatment he prescribed, while showing great insight at times, is less than adequate to alleviate sufferers of the disorder. But if Sasse's arguments fail to be fully adequate, the fault is certainly mitigated by the distress the notion of apostolic succession was causing the Lutheranism of Sasse's day.

**A matter of faith.** Above I examined Sasse's claim that purity of doctrine and administration of the sacraments is an adequate response to the charge that we do not have

ministers rightly called among us. Closely related to this is Sasse's assertion that in the final analysis one cannot really argue about these matters at all,

The apostolicity of origin, the claim that the church to which I belong is identical with the church of the apostles, is a matter of faith. The answer has to do with whether I consider the doctrine of my church to be apostolic. The claim of the Lutheran Church to be apostolic stands or falls with the claim that it has faithfully preserved the doctrine of the New Testament. For Lutherans certainly everything depends on the question: Where today is the doctrine of the apostles? (87-88)

This is again to open the charge of question-begging tautology. Certainly, the doctrine of the ministry is a doctrine. So the argument is at hand, concerning the apostolicity and thus the reality of the ministry in the Lutheran Church, cannot be gotten around by simply saying that our doctrine is pure. That must be argued, not assumed. Furthermore, by declaring that the issue is "a matter of faith," Sasse comes close to neglecting what we are to have faith in. That is, this statement would seem to imply that the matter is beyond argumentation over what the Scriptures say. I believe in Lutheran doctrine. Lutherans reject Rome's version of what makes a valid minister, therefore I do not need to argue about what makes for a valid minister. Here two different schemata are acknowledged to exist, Rome's and Lutheranism's, but they are forbidden to interact and debate one another because, after all, it is "a matter of faith."

**Rome's doctrine is mere tradition.** A major part of Sasse's reply to Rome's view of apostolicity and its necessity for a valid ministry is to say that it is merely an extra-biblical tradition that has solidified in the institutional church over time. Certainly Sasse is correct at least his far: the Roman insistence that a man may only be placed into the ministry by a Roman bishop saying just these words, with just this intention, with just this laying on of hands is indeed

without any explicit foundation in the Scriptures. And Sasse is further correct in linking up Rome's doctrine of succession with her doctrine of the infallibility of her magisterium, "In the tradition of doctrine and the succession of teachers there is said to be an inherent spirit at work infallibly revealing things." (92)

But Sasse inadvertently accepts his opponents ground when he says that "we nowhere have a mandate of our Lord to carry out an ordination, let alone instructions as to how it should be done" (100). We certainly do not have a mandate from the Lord to pick up the Roman *Rituale*, read just those words, while placing hands on someone's head, etc. But it is equally certain that we do have a mandate from the Scriptures to have in our midst men fulfilling the Office of the Ministry, an Office that is distinct from the royal priesthood of the baptized. Surely, therefore, we have a Dominical imprimatur for placing men into that Office (usually called ordination in our midst). We must defend the reality and validity of the Lutheran Church's placing of men into that Office (the validity of what are commonly called our ordinations).

This highlights a recurring problem in Lutheran discussions of the Office of the Ministry: equivocal terminology. What does "to ordain" mean? If it means to lay hands on someone's head and say such and such words, then clearly, ordination is an adiaphoron. But if "to ordain" means to place a man in the Office of the Ministry, then clearly it is not an adiaphoron but a necessity for the Church (AC VII, AC XIV). This confusion over what the word "ordination" should refer to has wreaked sad havoc on the ability of Lutherans to write and think clearly on the topic of the ministry, as can be seen here in Sasse. For my part, I will refer to "placing a man in the Office of the Ministry" rather than ordination. This is, I believe, a necessary acquiescence of brevity to precision and I encourage other Lutheran commentators to follow the same procedure.



**Historical Cynicism.** Regrettably, part of Sasse's reply slips into what can only be called historical cynicism. Having accepted Rome's definition of apostolic succession, and thus accepting that Lutheranism does not possess it, Sasse attempts to prove that Rome cannot have it either. He does this by way of a skeptical reading of the history of the Church.

There is first the fact that it was not always the Twelve who founded and organized these churches, yes, not even the apostles in the real meaning of the word. Indeed the greatest of the ancient churches, Antioch and Rome, were founded by unknown Christians.

A bishop receives his consecration from another bishop, whose consecration goes back to other bishops, right back to the first bishops who were consecrated by the apostles. How historical is this succession? In later times it can certainly be demonstrated or accepted without confidence[.]... But does this tell us that all consecrations go back to the apostles? Timothy was ordained by Paul with the laying of hands (2 Tim 1:6). In 1 Tim. 3 and 5 he was given instruction for appointing bishops, deacons, and widows (deaconesses), where laying on of hands is explicitly mentions. But were bishops everywhere ordained in this way? How were things done in Rome in Clement's day? We do not know. (99-100)

Does Sasse really mean to imply that the Church at Antioch or Rome existed without a connection to the Apostles and their Office? That is as little provable as Rome's more lavish traditions about the founding of the Church at Rome. That we may not know the first preachers at Antioch and Rome (although we are not without educated guesses from the Book of Acts) is

one thing – to then cynically claim that these churches were founded without the benefit of clergy in fellowship with the Apostles is quite another.

Furthermore, Sasse's cynicism is needless as it is based on a faulty acceptance of Rome's understanding of placing men into the Office of the Ministry. Sasse is correct to doubt that Rome's notions of what a bishop is and how a man should be placed into the Office extend back to the time of the apostles. But that is not a concern to Lutherans who view the Office of the Ministry as unitary and the ceremonies accompanying the placing of a man into the Office as adiaphora – while acknowledging that the placing in Office itself is not an adiaphoron. That is, since Lutherans assert that all ministers are bishops – that is, that all ministers possess the whole Office of the Ministry – is it so far fetched to claim that the Office of the Ministry was passed down from the apostles to those they placed in the Office at the behest of the Church, and so on down through the ages? As we shall see below, this is exactly the claim of the Lutheran Confessions.

**The validity of lay-only ordination.** The most radical argument Sasse brings to bear against Rome's notion of apostolic succession is that not only are Roman (or Eastern Orthodox) bishops not necessary to place a man into the Office of the Ministry, but that no clergy at all are necessary for this.

The regular way in Vilmar as in Löhe is that shepherds are ordained by shepherds, which is also regarded as the normal thing in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church and its church orders. Here our church expressly acknowledges the ancient catholic practice. The church of the Lutheran Reformation, however, has never been in doubt regarding the possibility of the office being bestowed without the traditional ordination by an ordained servant of the Word. Herein is agreement also among all those who do not simply regard

the existence of the holy ministry as the priesthood of all believers performing its function. (77)

A person was usually placed in the orders and offices of the congregation by the laying on of hands with prayer. This laying on of hands could be done by a single person, as the apostle Paul did (2 Tim. 1:6). Or it could be done by the presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14), or by both, as was apparently the case with Timothy, or by a whole congregation through their representatives (Acts 13:3). (80)

Here Sasse's exegesis of the pastoral epistles and Acts is simply flawed. Clearly, 2 Tim. 1:6 and 1 Tim. 4:14 refer to the same event – and when taken together, it is clear evidence that Paul considered himself part of the presbytery, as did Peter (1 Peter 5:1). These passages are vital for understanding the Lutheran insistence on the unitary nature of the Office of the Ministry: that Paul and Peter called themselves part of the presbytery shows that the Office of presbyter is the continuance of the Office Christ gave to the Apostles. Furthermore, Acts 13:3 may indeed be a proof text for the Confessional claim that the laity must be involved in placing a man in the Office (but it can be argued that this text in fact is not a good one for that proof), but to claim that the passage shows that the laity placed men into the Office of the Ministry *apart* from the clergy is simply fanciful.

I cannot dispute the fact that Hermann Sasse was much better read in the Confessions and history of the Lutheran Church than I or nearly any of my contemporaries. With that caveat, I must state that I am puzzled by Sasse's assertion that there was never any doubt that laity could place a man into the Office of the Ministry without the involvement of the clergy at any point in the process. I think vehemence against the Roman and Eastern notion of apostolic succession has driven from his mind what the Confessions actually say in Tr. 63-72.

Jerome therefore teaches that the distinction between the grades of bishop and presbyter (or pastor) is by human authority. The fact itself bears witness to this, for the power is the same, as I have already stated. 64 Afterwards one thing made a distinction between bishops and pastors, and this was ordination, for it was decided that one bishop should ordain the ministers in a number of churches. 65 But since the distinction between bishop and pastor is not by divine right, it is manifest that ordination administered by a pastor in his own church is valid by divine right. 66 Consequently, when the regular bishops become enemies of the Gospel and are unwilling to administer ordination, the churches retain the right to ordain for themselves. 67 For 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.

This right is a gift given exclusively to the church, and no human authority can take it away from the church. It is as Paul testifies to the Ephesians when he says, “When he ascended on high he gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8, 11, 12). He enumerates pastors and teachers among the gifts belonging exclusively to the church, and he adds that they are given for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Where the true church is, therefore, the right of electing and ordaining ministers must of necessity also be. So in an emergency even a layman absolves and becomes the minister and pastor of another. It is like the example which Augustine relates of two Christians in a ship, one of whom baptized the other (a catechumen), and the latter, after his Baptism, absolved the former. 68 Here the words of Christ apply which testify that the keys were given to the church and not merely to certain individuals: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20).

69 Finally, this is confirmed by the declaration of Peter, “You are a royal priesthood” (1 Pet. 2:9). These words apply to the true church which, since it alone possesses the priesthood, certainly has the right of electing and ordaining ministers. 70 The most common custom of the church also bears witness to this, for there was a time when the people elected pastors and bishops. Afterwards a bishop, either of that church or of a neighboring church, was brought in to confirm the election with the laying on of hands; nor was ordination anything more than such confirmation [*comprobatio*]. 71 Later on new ceremonies were added, many of which Dionysius describes; but he is a late and fictitious writer, whoever he may be, just as the writings of Clement are spurious. Still more recent writers added the words, “I give thee the power to sacrifice for the living and the dead.” But not even this is found in Dionysius!

72 From all these facts it is evident that the church retains the right of electing and ordaining ministers. Wherefore, when the bishops are heretics or refuse to administer ordination, the churches are by divine right compelled to ordain pastors and ministers for themselves *using their own pastors for this purpose*.<sup>3</sup> And it is the wickedness and

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<sup>3</sup> The italicized words do not appear in Tappert’s translation – nor in the first printing of KW, though they do appear in *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* and in the second printing of KW. In the that second printing of KW there is no note explain their absence in the first printing. Furthermore they are translated as “in the presence of their pastors,” which is hardly accurate. The words in Latin are *adhibitus suis pastoribus* and were well enough translated in the first version of the Concordia Reader’s Edition as “by having their pastors do it.” These words, while undoubtedly part of the original Treatise as penned at Smalcald, were omitted in the anonymously printed version of 1540, and from there were not translated by Dietrich for the 1580 German *Concordia* and were subsequently lost to the 1584 Latin printing. However, the context obviously assumes what they make clear: when

tyranny of the bishops that give occasion to schism and discord, for Paul commands the bishops who teach and defend impious doctrines and impious forms of worship should be regarded as anathema. (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 63-72. Tappert translation.)

The Church is neither just the laity nor just the clergy: it is the clergy and the laity, the whole people of God. As Sasse himself writes, “It is therefore in fact impossible in the New Testament to separate ministry and congregation” (78). Luther concurs, “Now wherever you find these offices or officers, you may be assured that the holy Christian people are there; for the church cannot be without these bishops, preachers, priests; and conversely, they cannot be without the church. Both must be together.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, when the Church is said to retain the power to ordain, this means that the laity and the clergy both have roles to play in placing a man into the Office of the Ministry, as the overall context of Tr. 63-72 makes clear. Much has been made of Augustine’s famous thought experiment about the two men in the boat. It is interesting that it is often used as an attempt to show that everyone is a minister while Melancthon uses it to show that the Church has the right to put men who are not ministers into the ministry. Furthermore, we might add an additional thought experiment. Imagine if a number of laymen broke off from a local congregation and elected one of their number as a pastor – a man whom the clergy of the church unanimously say is unfit for the ministry and thus refuse to agree (grant their *comprobatio*, Tr. 70) to his call to ministry. If the newly formed, breakaway congregation then insisted and installed the man in office without the *comprobatio* of any clergyman whatsoever, would the man actually be in the

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“The Church” is to ordain, it is understood that this means both laity and clergy doing their respective parts in the process.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Councils and the Church* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1966) LW 41:164.

Office of the Ministry?<sup>5</sup> Likewise with a group of clergymen who identify a man they want in the Office of the Ministry and proceed to place him in office without any involvement of the rest of the Church, that is, the laity – would a man so placed actually be in the Office of the Ministry? The overall context of Tr 63-72, and certainly the history of the Lutheran Church, urges the negative answer in both situations. The people of God as a whole, laity and clergy, place a man into the Office. If one acts without the other, at the very least there would be great doubt about the validity of such a placing in Office.

### **A Better Reply**

The argument brought by Rome and the East that Lutheranism lacks the ministry because it lacks apostolicity is a serious charge which must be met squarely from the Scriptures and the Confessions. As we have seen, our Confessions force the question on us by defining the Church as the place where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are rightly administered and then further saying that to administer the sacraments rightly one must be *rite vocatus*. So what is the positive Lutheran case for the fact that our ministers are really ministers? How do we argue that the apostolic ministry is in fact among us?

First, we examine the assumptions our opponents present to us and compare them to the Scriptures. Rome and the East present a neat syllogism to Lutheranism to deny the validity of its ministry. Major premise: There is no accession to the Office of the Ministry without a bishop. Minor premise: Lutherans do not have bishops. Conclusion: Lutherans cannot place men into the ministry.

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<sup>5</sup> Another though experiment that goes beyond the scope of this paper, but is nonetheless apropos the general discussion is this. Imagine that the two people in the stranded boat were women who had thought ahead and packed a lunch including a bottle of wine and some bread. Could the woman who baptized the other also conduct the Lord's Supper? Not should she, but could she: would she have the ability to do so?

As we have just seen from the Treatise, the Confessions do not attack the major premise. Rather, the Confessions attack the minor premise, vehemently asserting that we have bishops a plenty; for all ministers are bishops because there is only one Office of the Ministry by divine right. These ministers do their part along with the laity in putting other men into the Office of the Ministry: that is, the Church as a whole retains the right to place men in Office. The division of duties between bishop and presbyter is an invention of men for the sake of order in the Church. Rome cannot rob our churches of clergy (and thus of part of the church) by claiming that only a part of the Office of the Ministry is given to the presbyter while the whole gift is given to the men they call bishops. That Christ did give it as a unit is seen from the Biblical witness, where the terms *episkopos* and *presbyteros* are used interchangeably. And it is further proven from the history of the Church, where ordinations by presbyters were consistently recognized in ancient and medieval periods. These points have been eloquently demonstrated by A. C. Piepkorn in his vital essay, “The Lutheran View of the Validity of Lutheran Orders.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, here I am largely providing the outlines of the argument that he conclusively proves in this essay.

So the Confessional response to the claim that Lutherans don’t have the ministry is more robust than merely claiming that we have pure doctrine (although that is true, and vital!). Nor do the Confessions claim that men ever have or even can be placed into the Ministry without the whole Church, clergy and laity. Nor do our Symbols assert that the ministry itself is unimportant, identical or derivative of the priesthood of the baptized. Rather, the Confessional response to the charge that we do not have the apostolic ministry among us is to say, “That is a slur against us and not to be tolerated. Our ministers are ministers by divine right, holding the same Office of the Apostles as they passed it down to us through the call of the entire Church, both laity and

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<sup>6</sup> Part of Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue IV: Eucharist and Ministry. (LWF & BCEIA, 1970), 209-226.

clergy doing part of their calling, electing, examining, and installing of ministers. We use our own ceremonies and customs in putting these men in the Office to be sure – just as Rome has its own canon law for placing men into the Office. These things, derived by human right, are free. We retain what is essential: the Church puts a man in the Office received from the Apostles.” In short, the Confessional reply to, “you don’t have apostolic succession” is, “Oh yes we do, and here is why.”

**Conclusion:**

But now someone will ask, “So what? Does having a succession of men in the Office traceable back to the Apostles protect us from error or establish the validity of God’s Word?” No, it does not – it is, at the very least not a sufficient condition for those things. But there is much value in confessing the truths examined here. The unity of the Office of the Ministry is one of the key emphases of the Lutheran Reformation, a piece of ancient, Biblical teaching rescued from the accretions of false tradition. If we nod in agreement when the Romanists or Easterners say, “You do not have apostolic succession because you do not have bishops” then we deny this point of teaching.

Second, the Church as a whole is given the task of placing men in the Office of the Apostles. If it really were true that our Church was a fabrication of a cabal of laity alone, or a cabal of clergy alone, we would be a sect and not a church, for we would be conducting the ministry of the Church outside of Christ’s institution. Perhaps in that case we could fall back on Mark 9 as Marquart recommends. But happily we do not have to. We can confess that the ministry among us, and thus the right of administration of the Sacraments and preaching of the Word among us, stands on the Institution of Christ. Our ministers are *rite vocatus* based on the injunctions of God’s Word for the whole Church to place men into this Office. We know full



well, and history demonstrates that we are correct, that we thus stand in what may properly be called apostolic succession. Here is a final coda from Luther, demonstrating the importance of holding on to the Office of the Apostles, not for its own sake, but for the sake of the gifts:

“Now, if the apostles, evangelists, and prophets are no longer living, others must have replaced them and will replace them until the end of the world, for the church shall last until the end of the world [Matt. 28:20]. Apostles, evangelists, and prophets must therefore remain, no matter what their name, to promote God’s word and work. The pope and his followers, who persecute God’s word while admitting that it is true, must be very poor apostles, evangelists, and prophets, just like the devil and his angels. But why do I keep coming back to these shameful, filthy folk of the pope? Let them go again, and bid them not to return, or etc.

“Just as was said earlier about the other four parts of the great, divine, holy possession by which the holy church is sanctified, that you need not care who or how those from whom you receive it are, so again you should not ask who and how he is who gives it to you or has the office. For all of it is given, not to him who has the office, but to him who is to receive it through this office, except that he can receive it together with you if he so desires. Let him be what he will. Because he is in office and is tolerated by the assembly, you put up with him too. What he says or does is not his, but Christ, your Lord, and the Holy Spirit say and do everything, in so far as he adheres to correct doctrine and practice. The church, of course, cannot and should not tolerate open vices; but you yourself be content and tolerant, since you, an individual, cannot be the whole assembly or the Christian holy people.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *On the Councils and the Church* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1966) LW 41:155-56.