

**The Confession of the Church and
the Office of the Holy Ministry
according to J.K.W. Löhe, A. Vilmar,
T. Kliefoth, and C.F.W. Walther**

A Summary and Critique

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The time period of 1815-1866 and beyond represent a renewal of the confessional traditions in Germany, England, and America. According to Walter Conser, the renewal was a result of a search for both a religious and cultural alternative to the political and social trends of the day, namely, national purpose, popular participation in government, and world economic order.¹ This new order is most evident in the ecumenical agenda of the Prussian Union that obliterated doctrinal differences between Reformed and Lutheran churches through church political union. In addition, both rationalism and pietism had sought to undermine the mystery of the faith for individual or internal piety. In contrast to political unionism and radical individualism, the theologians of the confessional revival period viewed the pastorate, the church, and the sacraments according to the Scriptures and through the lens of the Lutheran Confessions. They insisted on a doctrinally sound Gospel proclamation in Word and Sacrament required Confessional statements, namely for Lutherans, those collected as the Book of Concord of 1580. Most especially, they “realized the inherent dangers of unbridled individualism” and so articulated, “human development consists in the balance of intellect and emotions, and that such balance can only be found in community.”² What did the Lutheran theologians of this period confess regarding the office of the holy ministry and the church? Was their confession a true representation of these doctrines according to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions? This paper will seek to answer these questions.

The Lutheran Confessions are the *norma normata*, normed by the Scriptures. They serve as the hermeneutic for interpreting the Scriptures in that they express the *regula fidei* (rule of faith).

¹ Walter H Conser, *Church and Confession : Conservative Theologians in Germany, England, and America 1815-1866* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1984), 314.

² Ibid., 329.

For example, the Augsburg Confession begins with God, Original Sin, and the Son of God. These three articles are the foundational knowledge for the understanding of Article IV on Justification. In order that we may obtain this faith, namely Articles I-IV, Christ instituted the office of preaching and administering the sacraments (AC V). This office is not free-floating but located in the church, the assembly of all believers and saints (AC VIII). “For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word” (AC VII).³ Which Word of God gives the assurance that the sacraments are being administered in conformity? The dominical mandate [*mandatum, Befehl*] and the promise of grace confirm the rite as a sacrament given by God for the forgiveness of sins (Ap XIII, 4). The authority to promise grace lies with God (Ap XIII,3). This returns us to purely preaching according to the Gospel. The Holy Scriptures provide our Lord’s mandate and institution [*Befehl und Gebot*] for the office of the holy Ministry, for the church, and for the holy sacraments. Human rites and regulations apart from Christ’s mandate are not binding, but kept for the sake of love and peace when they do not contradict or undermine the Gospel (AC XXVIII, 53-56). Thus, concerning the Lord’s Supper the Formula states: “the position of Luther recounted here is based upon the unique, firm, immovable, indubitable rock of truth from the Words of Institution in the holy, divine Word, and was so understood, taught, and propagated by the holy evangelists, and apostles and their disciples and hearers” (SD VII, 42)⁴

³ Robert Kolb, Timothy J Wengert and Charles P Arand, *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42. Quoted from the German text..

⁴ *Ibid.*, 600.

Which are these words of mandate and institution given from Scriptures by the Confessions? Regarding the office of preaching, Luke 10:16 “He who hears you, hears me” is quoted repeatedly by Melancton in both the Augsburg Confession and Apology (AC XXVIII, 22; Ap VII/VIII, 28 and 47). The divine authority of the office is traced to Christ himself via his voice and its authority is to speak only those words, which Christ gave. Christ sent the apostles with the mandate of Office of the Keys: “As my Father has sent me, even so I am sending you... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld” (John 20:21-23; cited in AC XXVIII, 5-6; Tr 9, 23-24 and 31). The words of Matthew 16:15-19 and 18:18 indicate the office of the keys were entrusted to all the apostles who are commissioned by Christ to the church (Tr 22-24). Luther states: “Christ gave to his apostles only spiritual authority, that is, the command to preach the gospel, to proclaim forgiveness of sins, to administer the sacraments, and to excommunicate the ungodly without the use of physical force... Indeed, Christ said, ‘Go, ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.’ Again, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’” (Tr 31)⁵ Thus, Luther connects the institutional mandate of the preaching office in John 20:21 to the institutional mandate of Holy Ministry in Matthew 28:19-20. Baptism goes with teaching and both go with the office of the holy ministry. Thereby the Confessions rest the office of the ministry and the church upon the dominical mandate in the Scriptures, namely that through the apostles Christ himself speaks, absolves, teaches and baptizes (Lk 10:16; Mt 16:19-20 and Jn 20:21-23; Mt 28:16-20).⁶

⁵ Ibid., 335.

⁶ See Thomas M Winger, "The Office of the Holy Ministry According to the New Testament Mandate of Christ," *Logia* 7, no. 2 (1998): 37-46. for a complete exposition of these themes.

Johann Konrad Wilhelm Löhe (1808-1872) served as a parish pastor in Neuendettlesau in the region of Franconia, Germany. Despite his isolation, his writings on church and ministry were widely distributed. One such document is his “Three Books on the Church” of 1845.⁷ While not a doctrinal treatise, his intent was to challenge his contemporaries with theology grounded in the Scriptures and the confessions. Löhe rejected the isolation of the individual of the period and confessed the church to be the communion of saints, where man is not individual but in fellowship with God and his fellow believers.⁸ This fellowship is eternal, comprising both the saints of earth and the saints of heaven and thus spanning all generations (cf. Heb 12:22-24).⁹ Löhe’s missionary emphasis is born of his confession that the New Testament church not a territorial church but a church of all people, with one shepherd (cf. Jn 10:16). The Lord unites the church for His purpose. Thus, the where the church is catholic; there it is in mission.¹⁰ Löhe rightly confesses that the Apostolic word are the unifying force for the church, arguing from Luke 10:16 that the Confessions use for the holy ministry. Thus, Löhe binds the Word with the apostles. “A congregation can be apostolic even if no apostle ever entered its territory if only it holds to the Word of the apostles.”¹¹ The Scriptures are clear and always constitutive of the church. As the Confessions argued against humanly instituted tradition, so Löhe confesses: “all that tradition can convey to men is either what is already in the Scriptures or something

⁷ Wilhelm Löhe, *Three Books About the Church*, trans. James L Scaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

different.”¹² While the Confessions do not use the language of an invisible and visible church, Löhe vests the visible with the character of the whole, because it “possesses all the gifts of the invisible church”¹³ and is “made one by God's clear Word”.¹⁴ It is clear that Löhe rejects both antiquity or the papacy as marks of the church but instead articulates the Lutheran confessions as a mark of purity because of their faithfulness to the Word of God.¹⁵ Regarding the holy ministry, preaching of salvation in Christ occupies the first place, both for conversion and concern for the faith of the souls in his care. The catechism is the basic confessional document for instruction “the divine-human rule of faith”¹⁶ that illuminates the God’s Word. Preaching, sacrament, catechization, and the care of souls through the confessional constitute the holy ministry for Löhe. Unfortunately Löhe does not articulate the doctrines of the church or the ministry principally from the dominical mandate or institution. This is in part because of the nature of this text and also a result of his assumption that the doctrines of the Confessions are the *norma normata* that is normed by the Scriptures.¹⁷

In “*Aphorismen über neutestamentlichen Ämter*” of 1847, Löhe presents his doctrine of the offices of the church according to the dominical mandates, unlike the more casual method of “*Drei Bücher*.” Like the Augsburg Confession, Löhe begins the church, leading to the office of the ministry and its various accessory offices. His confession of the congregation or church

¹² Ibid., 75.

¹³ Ibid., 90.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91.

¹⁵ Ibid., 107.

¹⁶ Ibid., 173.

¹⁷ Ibid., 173.

[*ekklesia*] finds its Scriptural basis in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁸ This is in contrast with AC VII and Ap VII/VIII that use the dominical mandates in the Gospels and the relevant Pauline texts. Christ uses Matthew 18:15-18 to suggest the endorsement of the local congregation. The congregation is derived from the office of the ministry¹⁹ and “it is nevertheless beyond all doubt that the Lord Jesus Himself founded an office of the New Testament.”²⁰ To prove this office, Löhe again departs from the mandate-and-institution method of the Confessions. For proof that Jesus instituted the office, Löhe cites 1 Cor 12:28; 2 Cor 3:6-11; and 2 Cor 5:19-21. These are the “bright and clear” passages of Scripture proving the office for Löhe. The apostolic office shares some of the textual evidence (Mt 28:16ff and Jn 20:21ff) with the Confessions but continues by describing the office in terms of the witness of Acts. Löhe divides the remaining chapters according to the order of 1 Corinthians, namely Apostles, prophets, evangelists, presbyters and bishops, deacons, and ends with a brief discussion of ordination. In this text, Löhe does not outwardly begin with the mandate of Christ, the institution of the office, and the means of grace for the church, thus differing methodologically from the Confessions.

August Friedrich Christian Vilmar (1800-1868) served as professor of theology at Marburg and church leader in the Hessian Lutheran Church. He rejected the radical theologies of David Friedrich Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, and the main protestant figures of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Hegel. Against these men and their trends, which he calls the

¹⁸ Wilhelm Löhe, *Aphorisms on the New Testament Offices and Their Relationship to the Congregation : On the Question of the Church's Polity*, trans. John R Stephenson (Malone, Tex.: Repristination Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

“theology of rhetoric,” Vilmar composed his “The Theology of Facts.”²¹ The theologians of his day were approaching theology as science born in man, that is, one where the observer determines the meaning of the text from the phenomena. In contrast is the theology of facts is properly theology because it is a speaking from God, is grounded in all his revelation of the Godhead, justification, Word of God, and Sacrament of the altar. From the grounding of this “theology of facts” Vilmar articulates his confession of the church and ministry. This confession is necessary “for the preservation of pure doctrine and the right sacrament.”²² He argues on the basis of AC VII against the invisible church as his contemporaries articulated it.²³ With the Confessions, Vilmar thus argues for the necessity of the church and her ordinances for the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments. In “the Theology of Facts,” Vilmar does not begin to argue on the basis of the Scripture. Instead, he argues against his opponents (through logic and rhetoric!) He proceeds to Scripture later. The bulk of his discussion on the Church centers on the action of the Spirit and the laying on of hands.

Vilmar argues for the necessity of a ministerial office on the basis of experience of the seelsorger: instructing, rebuking, and forgiving. For certainty, Christians “merely have to return to the one source of these victories over world, sin, death, and the devil, and indeed straightway to this one source.”²⁴ It is not the pastor who is the source; rather, “that one source is Christ the Lord himself who has set these poor people, ever so weak, entangled in and sick from sins, in the office of Word and Sacrament. It is an office directly and immediately theirs, can only be there in

²¹ August Friedrich Christian Vilmar, *The Theology of Facts Versus the Theology of Rhetoric : Confession and Defense*, trans. Roy A Harrisville (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2008).

²² *Ibid.*, 71.

²³ *Ibid.*, 109.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

the most immediate way, since only from this office does truth proceed.”²⁵ Like Löhe, the office finds its source independent of the congregation, since the congregation is made up of saints and heathen. Rather, the office gathers the congregation, Vilmar argues, from the Treatise.²⁶ Methodologically, Vilmar does not arrive to the mandate until this late in his work. He argues from the Augustana, specifically citing Mark 16, John 20, et al. But his polemic against his opponents guides him to argue on the basis of logic and the Confessions only in the end, all but ignoring the Scriptures.

Theodor Kliefoth (1810-1895) served as church superintendent in Schwerin of Mecklenburg. His writings cover the history of dogma, ecclesiology, church orders, exegetical works focusing on eschatology, and pastoral care. While the majority of his work is inaccessible in English, many excerpts were made available for the course. One such work, “*Theorie des Kultus der evangelischen Kirche*” (1844) offers Kliefoth’s confession of church and ministry. For example, the church is the place of God’s giving and man’s receiving. The congregation is the church limited to time and space. “If one considers the church from this side of her emergence, it is purely the work of Christ, for there what is done to the church is only through Christ. The church emerges not through a self-acting assembly as a free association of her members, but Christ gathers her. But she stands there as completely activity-less and permitting (things to happen to her); the church's relation with Christ is that she receives what Christ gives as in the relation of the Giving and Receiving [*in dem Verhältnisse des Gebens und Empfängern*] falls all

²⁵ Ibid., 106.

²⁶ Ibid., 113.

the activity on this side of the Givings.”²⁷ And ““The congregation appears as a child of the church on the one hand and the mother of the church on the other. This is exactly the right meaning and position in the churchly life. The life of Christ is an electric stream, which from time to time flows from the church into the individuals and from the individuals into the church... So the congregation is the intermediate member between the church and her individual members... Each individual Christian congregation is an image [likeness] of the church.”²⁸

From this same work, Kliefoth confesses a doctrine of the ministry in relation to the congregation. “As soon as the congregation formally regularly puts a man into the office [offices, *beamten*] individuals out of her members with the oversight of definite cultus-act, the originally flowing distinction of Giving and Receiving, Teaching and Hearing, etc. becomes fixed at least partially.”²⁹ Both congregation and clergy are under Christ as their Lord, neither less holy nor spiritual. Kliefoth here strongly echoes the Reformation call for a common baptismal spiritual estate, with the old distinction being the authorization of the clergy to serve the congregation through preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments. Neither the congregation nor her clergy acts of themselves but rather “the congregation has to honor the clergy exactly as the clergy is the vessel and organ of the spirit of Christ in the congregation.”³⁰ Even more clearly, Kliefoth explains the task of the congregation’s ministers in his “*Acht Bücher von der Kirche*” of

²⁷ Theodor, Kliefoth, *Theorie Des Kultus Der Evangelischen Kirche, Von Dr. Th. Kliefoth*, Class handout: "Theodor Kliefoth, his Ecclesiology and Liturgical Theology, May 2010", trans. Naomichi Masaki (Parchim und Ludwigslust: Hinstorff, 1844), §17, 17.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, §38, 39.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §58, 59.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §61,64.

1854.³¹ Kliefoth echoes the Confessional methodology when he states: “The Lord knows very well (John 5:39) that a Scripture is and has power, ... but His mandate given to the church does not say that the Scripture should be circulated and read, but that the word of God should be preached and learned” and “In the Lord's Supper one must give out bread and wine according to the Lord's mandate and another must eat and drink; in baptism one must baptize with water to another in the name of the Trinity and the latter must let it take place.”³² The means of grace and the means of grace office [*Gnadenmittelamt*] were instituted by Christ. They do not find their source in the development of the church but rather find their source in the dominical mandate, received by the apostles who transferred the mandate to the next generation of pastors and elders. So also the preaching of the Gospel is the *viva vox Christi* in the congregation and is given through the preaching office. “The preservation of the *Predigtamt* is not to be considered as work once created and now the church is further living by herself, but as continual divine creation of the same. God gives and places shepherd and teacher continuously in the spiritual office preserved by Him through the mediation of the church.”³³ Kliefoth’s articulation of church, congregation, and office of the ministry strongly echo the methodology of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology.

The definitive collection of the confession of C.F.W. Walther (1811-1887) on the church and the ministry is in *Die Stimme unserer in der Frage von Kirche und Amt* of 1875.³⁴ Unlike the

³¹ Theodor Kliefoth, *Acht Bücher Von Der Kirche*, Class handout: "Theodor Kliefoth, his Ecclesiology and Liturgical Theology, May 2010", trans. Naomichi Masaki (Schwerin; Rostock: Stiller, 1854).

³² *Ibid.*, 179.

³³ *Ibid.*, 200-201.

³⁴ Here cited from: C F W Walther, *Church and Ministry : Witness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church on the Question of the Church and the Ministry* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1987).

Augsburg Confession, which confesses the church as constituted by the Word and Sacrament administered by her ministers, Walther begins his theses with a confession of the church, born out of the Gospel. Not until Thesis V does Walther engage the Sacraments as the church recognizable in the world.³⁵ While Löhe and Kliefoth hesitated and Vilmar repudiated the distinction of the invisible and visible church, Walther uses it as his grounding for ecclesiology. This is a departure from the mandate-and-institution methodology of the Augsburg Confession, instead relying on the Treatise.³⁶ Yet, Thesis V argues for the church and ministry in harmony with the Scriptural basis of Augsburg and the Apology, namely, Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15-16. Thesis IV cites Matthew 18:18 and John 20:22-23 but attaches them to the congregation rather than the office of the ministry. Like Kliefoth and Löhe who saw ecclesiology as the necessary contemporary doctrinal issue in need of further formulation, Walther articulated a confession that went beyond the Lutheran Confessions. He is willing to assert the institution of Christ of preaching and sacrament in initial point of Thesis VII but supplements it in points VIII.a through VIII.c. These points are the formulated carillon call for the Missouri Synod's arguments with Löhe and Grabau on the office of the Holy Ministry. Namely, heterodoxy does not remove the pure Word and sacraments from all the members of a particular church body, but they are to flee these sects and false teachers, and adhere to an orthodox body. Löhe took issue

³⁵ Ibid., 67ff.

³⁶ See "Loeche's Letter to Grossman" in: C F W Walther *and others, At Home in the House of My Fathers : Presidential Sermons, Essays, Letters, and Addresses From the Missouri Synod's Great Era of Unity and Growth*, ed. Matthew C Harrison (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2009), 115. Löhe acknowledges that Walther argues according to Luther but criticizes his principal use of the Treatise at the expense of AC and the Ap. Futher, Löhe is critical of the extensive use of the church fathers, Luther, and the Confessions but argues for a return to the Scriptures. As was demonstrated above, Löhe is arguing for a methodology in harmony with Melancthon's in the Augustana.

with this emphasis on an individualistic view of the church, reflecting the contemporary Erlangen rejection of radical individualism.

Walther further confesses his understanding of the Holy Ministry in his “Sermon on the Office of the Ministry” of 1875.³⁷ In this sermon on Romans 12:7-16, the *Predigtamt* “has its basis above all in this, that God has made His Church of believers a spiritual body”³⁸ and in order that the faith confessed in Articles I-IV of the Augsburg Confession may be believed. While his point is valid in light of the text, it is not in light of the whole witness of the New Testament. God established a public office in the Church “because God... desires that in His Church all things should happen in an orderly and honorable manner.”³⁹ The basis for the public preaching office is “that Christians possess various gifts for the service of the whole.”*Ibid.*, 150. He gives out the gift of the Word because they have been conferred [*übertragen*] on him by the church, who is the bride of Christ, her Lord. Expositing the text from Romans, Walther attributes five duties of the public preaching office: “the first and most important is teaching; the second is admonition; the third is giving, or the concern of the office for the poor; the fourth is governing, or the administering of discipline and order; and finally, the fifth is the exercise of mercy, or the concern of the office for the sick, the weak, and the dying.”⁴⁰ One might be critical of Walther for minimizing the Sacraments. He may be assuming them into the Word. Is it likely Walther is here speaking specifically to the office of preaching and not the *Gnadenmittelamt*?

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 146-154.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

Walther speaks directly as to the possession or authority of the mean of grace office in his “Sermon on John 20:19-31 Regarding Absolution.”⁴¹ Specifically, Walther argues that the authority conferred to the Apostles was conferred to the church and not to her ministers immediately. “The apostles were infallible; the ministers of the Church today are not. The apostles had the power to work miracles and prophecy, the ministers of the Church today do not. The apostles were called immediately by Christ, the Son of God the ministers of the Church today are called mediately by men. The apostles were called to go into the entire world; the ministers of the Church nowadays are confined to the field of the congregation assigned to them. But as to the minister of preaching the Gospel, there is no difference.”⁴² Walther goes on to attach baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and absolution to the preaching office. Yet, these gifts of the preaching office are conferred but properly belong to the Church of all ages. Therefore, the words of absolution are trustworthy spoken by the minister of the Gospel but also from “a Christian brother in the name of God.” In this same sermon, Walther upholds the holy sacraments but speaks of them in distinction from the office of the ministry. Namely, he is concerned about the efficacy of the sacraments being bound to the Word of God and not the office of the ministry. This is a helpful distinction but fails to articulate the office by any other terms than good order.

In conclusion, this paper has sought to answer the questions: What did the Lutheran theologians of this period confess regarding the office of the holy ministry and the church? Was their confession a true representation of these doctrines according to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions? Clearly, the Augsburg Confession and Apology defend both the office of the ministry and the church on the basis of the Scriptures, especially Christ’s own mandate and

⁴¹ Ibid., 202-210.

⁴² Ibid., 206.

institution. The views of Löhe, Vilmar, Kliefoth, and Walther on the office and the church each respect this tradition and methodology to varying degrees. From this limited survey, it is apparent that the distinct contexts of each theologian socially, politically, and theologically caused each to articulate an ecclesiology in distinction to the next. Of the four, Kliefoth's methodology most closely reflects confessional methodology and thus the Scriptures. Further investigation would prove fruitful as Lutherans continue to struggle to articulate a Biblical confession of both church in ministry in our own distinct context. As with these theologians we ought to follow the instructions of the Confessions themselves: "The extent to which all other writings are to be approved and accepted shall be judged and evaluated on the basis and according to this form [the Book of Concord], for it is taken from God's Word" (SD, Rule and Norm 10).⁴³

⁴³ Kolb, Wengert and Arand, *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 529.

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