Luther on Call and Ordination: A Look at Luther and the Ministry

Markus Wriedt

Introduction

Ecclesiology was not a subject of discussion in the Middle Ages. “I believe in the one and holy, catholic church.” With that sentence from the Creed, laity and clerics alike summarized their understanding and doctrine of the church. Even though several reform movements criticized the practice of the ministry in different ways—the lack of pastoral care and the worldliness of bishops and popes, for example—none ever doubted the reality of the one church as the basis of society and culture, of daily life, and political affairs. The unity of the religious and non-religious areas was not touched. “Religio est vinculum societatis”—“religion is the chain of society.” That is, religion is the binding force, the glue that permeates and holds all together. The proverb clearly illustrates the deep conviction of man in the Middle Ages, even in the fifteenth century when complaints about the “real church” as they experienced it became overwhelming.

Thus Martin Luther’s critique was often interpreted as a sequel to the late medieval reform discussion about church, ministry, and the implementation of pastoral care derived from reform movements such as the Modern Devotion (Devotio Moderna), the Bohemian Brethren, the Hussite movement, and from several of the reform congregations of the mendicant orders. As a member of this last group, the reformed congregations of the Augustinian order, Luther was educated by Johann von Staupitz and others in the ideas of a Biblical-based reform “in head and members” of the church. It seems Staupitz concentrated or blended the different attempts at reform and became, as Heiko A. Oberman provocatively pointed out, a “forerunner of the Reformation.”

In what follows we shall see how much Luther is distinct from his medieval precedents. His critique of the late medieval church was based

---

1For the understanding of religion see the study of Ernst Feil, Religio. Die Geschichte eines neuzitlichen Grundbegriffs vom Frühchristnetum bis zur Reformation (Göttingen, 1986).


Dr. Markus Wriedt is research professor at the Institut für Europäische Geschichte in Mainz, Germany, and newly appointed Visiting Professor of Theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee. A shorter version of this article was delivered at a student-faculty convocation at Concordia Seminary on November 8, 2000.
on another foundation and destroyed the system of religious and secular unity of the last thousand years. With Luther a new epoch began. He was—even though he did not want to become this—the founder of a new understanding of church and society, and with that, one of the prophets of the modern age.

At the same time, bear in mind that Luther was indeed a man of the late medieval age. Not only that, he was thoroughly educated by late medieval teachers, monks, and professors. He internalized the system of philosophy as well as that of theology, the daily piety as well as the social life, the stress on hope and faith as well as fright and sorrow, all bound up within the mindset of a later medieval "individuum." Yet when I say "individuum," I am mistaken in a sense, for that concept—the individual approach—was not his starting point but the result of a long-lasting process of emancipation and recognition. Looking back at the end of his life, Luther commented in the preface to his Latin writings that he had been in all the controversy quite by accident and unintentionally driven by hostile opponents to rethink things over the years.3 I think Luther is right in his self-assessment. The revolving results of the Reformation—today's historians of the Reformation discuss these phenomena under the title of "confessionalization" which means the modernization and introduction of social discipline to the reformed societies4—were not completely intended by Luther. He did not want to found a new church or, even worse, a new religion called Protestantism. He wanted to "re-form," to bring the established church back to its roots of the consensus quinquesecularis, that is, the consensus of the first five centuries as well as the roots of Biblical times. Several consequences of his reform attempt he tried to correct. After the 1530 Diet of Augsburg he drew back and with great irritation saw the Reformation taking on a secular face.

**Luther’s Understanding of the Ministry**

Even though Luther intensified the discussion about church, he never wrote a book "de ecclesia."5 When he disputed with Cardinal Cajetan in Würzburg in August 1518, the Roman legate summarized Luther's

---

3Martin Luther, Werke (Weimar, 1883- ), vol. 54, pp. 179-187; p. 180, line 3f. [Hereafter cited as WA; hence: WA 54, 179-187; 180, 3f.] Martin Luther. Luther’s Works (Philadelphia and St. Louis, 1957- ), vol. 34, pp. 327-338; 328. [The “American Edition” hereafter cited as LW; hence LW 34, 327-338; 328.]


5For the current research on Luther’s ecclesiology see the following titles which have been consulted for the recent study. Carl Axel Aurelius, Verborgene Kirche Luthers Kirchenverständnis aufgrund seiner Streitschriften und Exegese 1519-1521 (Hannover, 1983). S. J. Barnett, "Where Was Your Church before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of
explanation with the sentence “What you say means founding a new church.” Luther responded that he wanted to reform but certainly not to break with the Roman church which he had accepted life-long as the true, apostolic, and catholic church.6

To reiterate, Luther never explained his Biblical understanding of the church as a whole in one comprehensive treatise, but he articulated several reform ideas within his polemical writings. Interpreting Luther’s ecclesiology has to take note of this literary dimension: the Wittenberg professor wrote polemical writings, aggressive critique, and powerful answers to his enemies. Thus he never had time—and a calmed/quiet/peaceful heart—to develop a systematic study. That is one problem of discussing Luther’s ecclesiology. Do not forget this as we look at Luther’s comments, or we risk coloring what are Biblically rooted ideas with circumstances that likely no longer exist or apply in our day. Not every word becomes a norm for all time.

The other problem in grasping Luther’s ecclesiology lies with the different fronts he encounters in his battle for a reform of the church. We can name at least three different battle lines. In the first years Luther started to discuss the late medieval understanding of church in the context


of his critique of the praxis of indulgence-letters. Starting at the point that there is no theological legitimacy for that practice, he quickly found that the process of establishing legitimacy itself caused several problems for understanding the church and its authority. Another frontline was opened in the early 1520s when reform-orientated radicals brought tumult to the Wittenberg group of reformers. Not only Andreas Karlstadt and Thomas Müntzer but also spiritualistic radicals denied the necessity of the ministry and the need for pastoral order in an evangelical church. A third frontline distinguished different positions or meanings within the Reformation group. Luther’s understanding of ministry is a result of his struggle for righteousness and his exploration of the “evangelium.” His distinction between Law and Gospel as much as the consequences of this finding for an Biblically-based ethic caused separation and distinctions within the group of the Wittenberg reformers, starting with Johann Agricola and going forth to Georg Major and Philipp Melanchthon.

As already mentioned, the starting point for Luther’s development is late medieval ecclesiology, concentrating on the terms “potestas ordinis” and “potestas iurisdictionis.” Potestas—translating the Greek “exousía”—refers to the authority and power of the minister. He holds by the way of his ordination—or better: consecration—the power to administer the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist that is understood as the holy sacrifice of the blood and body of Christ. The medieval liturgy for the consecration of a priest puts the formula this way: “accipe postestatem offerendi sacrificium in ecclesia pro vivis et mortuis in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.” The authority to be a priest leading or presiding at the service is called the “potestas ordinis.”

The priest not only carries out his work within the church, that is, within the service, but one of his most important duties is also pastoral care. During the Middle Ages the term “pastoral care”—cura animarum or “care of souls”—describes especially the duties of a bishop. It includes administration of his diocese, organization of the services, and the calling and installation of various clerical positions: deacons, presbyters, sextons, and others who hold many assignments in the church in that area or diocese. In the later centuries, pastoral care was understood more and more as the duty of a minister to care for the souls of his parishioners. To teach the ecclesiastical doctrine, to guide people seeking answers, and to judge the orientation of their life and community became especially the most essential duty of a priest. He was the guide on the way to salvation. The church became the exclusive “mediatrix salvatoris.” The prime authority of a priest was concentrated in the sacrament of penance: he tested the contrition of the sinner, he gave absolution, and he imposed penalties. Thus the priest became both father in faith and judge, combined in one person. The accent

7Quoted from the Bulla unionis Armeniorum “Exsultate Deo” (22.11.1439), quoted from Enchiridion Symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum, eds. Heinrich Denziger and Adolf Schönmetzer, Freiburg 36 1976, No. 1326.
on the latter was intensified in late medieval times.\(^8\)

So Luther experienced priests, church, and especially the pope as the most powerful authority not only on questions of religious life but also on the question of eternal salvation. And when Luther started to discuss the practice of indulgences, he quickly became involved in the question of ecclesiastical authority and the ministry of priests. He denied the understanding of “postestas iurisdictionis” exclusively for the priests only and claimed in his interpretation of Matthew 16:18-19 that Jesus gave this authority not to Peter alone but to all the apostles and that meant to the whole church.\(^9\)

This was the result of the dispute with Alexander Prierenias, a poor scholastic theologian who tried to defend the papacy on the grounds of tradition. For example, he asserted five points against Luther and other Wittenberg heretics. One of these is formulated to claim that those who say the church is not permitted to do what it is doing are to be condemned (anathemata sit). With that he tried to establish a broad papal tradition that Luther destroyed by his arguments based on the Scripture alone. In the years that followed, Luther came to the conclusion that with this argument he had moved fundamentally the ground of the medieval church. The discussion about indulgences and Biblical proof for the administration of the Sacraments through priests alone were no longer the focus. The dispute concentrated more and more on the question of who or what has the last authority in church and in society as a whole.\(^10\)

In the early 1520s Luther found that Matthew 16:18f. is not the foundation of the papacy and not even of a specific ministry. He combined this quotation with Matthew 18:18 and John 20:22f. and claimed that the authority to bind and loose sins was given to the church as community, not exclusively to a special person or ministry: “All Christians here are given this authority even though several unrighteous claimed this power exclusively for themselves, some such as the pope, bishops, and clergers who claim this power and say it has been given to them alone and not to lay people.”\(^11\) With that Luther touched on the question of what “church” means and pointed to his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

---


\(^9\) WA 2, 189, 33-35: “Relinquitur ergo, quod Christus responsum Petra acceptarit non pro solo Petro sed pro toto collegio apostolorum et disciplulorum” (Resolutio Lutheriana super propositione sua decima tertia de potestatie pape 1519).


\(^11\) WA 10/3, 96, 15ff.: “Allen Christenn wirdt hye (Joh 20, 22f.) gebenn dyse gewalt, wiewohl etzliche unbilliche yhn allein tzu geeygent haben, als Babst, Bischoffe unnd Pfaffen, die woellen die gewalt habenn und sagenn, sie ist yhn allein gebenn und nit den leyhen.”
In the year 1520 the Franciscan monk Augustin Alfeld of Leipzig provoked Luther with the publication of a pamphlet “On the Apostolic See, Whether It Is of Divine Legitimacy or Not.” At the end of May 1520 Luther received a copy of the tract. In this booklet Alfeld tried to prove on the basis of Scripture that the papacy is legitimized through divine authority. Therefore, Alfeld insisted, Luther had to respect the pope. Alfeld used a very simple argument: no community can exist without a head that unified the widespread interests and many members, and in the church that one head is the pope. Not only logical reason but also Scripture proves the case, said Alfeld: the high priest Aaron is the true model from the Old Testament for the ministry of Peter. So Rome became the new Jerusalem. All true scholarship in the church has to be based on the teachers of the church, that is, on the fathers, just as true piety is related to the holiness of Peter and his successors. Alfeld orchestrated his tract by blending in several Biblical quotations and then called himself a theological Alexander the Great who cuts the Gordian knot of Luther’s ecclesiastical problems with seven swords.

Luther was shocked. But he was not alone. The academic community was irritated by the poor argumentation and the ridiculous style used by Alfeld. Thus nobody was particularly eager to stoop to write an answer. Luther first left it for his famulus, Johannes Lonicer, asking him to write something. But several days later Alfeld published a German translation of his Latin tract, making it available to the wider Leipzig citizenry and dedicating it to the city mayor and to the members of the curia. Now Luther could no longer keep silent. He wrote his famous treatise “On the Papacy in Rome Against the Most Famous Romanist in Leipzig.”12 We can’t follow his arguments throughout this book —arguably, it seems to me, the best ecclesiastical study Luther ever wrote—but we can start our sketch of Luther’s ideas with lines from the tract where Luther gave a brief but fully satisfying definition of what he understood by the word “church”:

Scripture speaks about Christendom very simply and in only one way...[that is] that Christendom means an assembly of all the people on earth who believe in Christ, as we pray in the Creed: “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints.” This community or assembly means all those who live in true faith, hope, and love. Thus the essence, life, and nature of Christendom is not a physical assembly, but an assembly of hearts in one faith....”13

---

12WA 6, 285-324; LW 39, 55-104.
13Die Schrift redet von der Christenheit gar schlicht, und zwar nur auf eine Weise. Über diese hinaus haben sie (i.e., die Römer) zwei andere Weisen in den Gebrauch gebracht: Die erste Weise, die nach der Schrift, ist, daß die Christenheit eine Versammlung aller Christgläubigen auf Erden heißt, wie wir im Glaubensbekenntnis beten: “Ich glaube
“An assembly of hearts in one faith”—that is the meaning of church. Nothing more. Luther says nothing about ministry, law, order, obedience, councils, household, and other things like that. Luther knows about all of these, but he concentrates on the Biblical foundation to lay out his vision of church.

In another book from the year 1520, his famous De captivitate Babylonica ("On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church") Luther wrote:

It is a shameful and an unrighteous slavery, that a Christian, who is free, is subjected to other power and doctrines than heavenly and divine.\(^{14}\)

In his “Freedom of the Christian” Luther explains this argument more clearly. The church has no authority to judge all dimensions of human life. The church cannot promise or give grace.\(^{15}\) The church is not able to implement new Sacraments. The church has no power to found new laws. The administration of the pope does not have the same authority and legitimacy as the Word of God. His government has to be judged by the Scripture and is subordinated to the revelation of the divine will in the Gospel. Instead, the church has the authority to distinguish clearly the Word of God from human sayings. That is the power of the church. There is no other realm for ecclesiastical judgment.\(^{16}\)

If there is no theological, i.e., Biblical-based distinction between ecclesiastical ministers and the true believers, and if the church is constituted by the community of hearts in one faith, then there is no legitimacy in the distinction between clergy and laity. Luther turns this negative argument to a positive one: the potestas iurisdictionis is given to the church, that is, to all believers. All believers are members of the church through Baptism. If all baptized Christians possess the authority of judgment about life and doctrine, all believers hold the authority of priests. Thus Luther claimed that all baptized are priests and receive through Baptism and faith a part in Christ’s ministry as Prophet, King, and High Priest. Therefore,

\[\text{Everyone who knows himself as a Christian shall be sure and know for certain that we are all priests in the same sense, and that we}\]

\[\text{an den heiligen Geist, eine Gemeinschaft der Heiligen." Diese Gemeinde oder Versammlung umfaßt all die, die in rechtem Glauben, rechter Hoffnung und rechter Liebe leben, was zur Folge hat, daß der Christenheit Wesen Leben und Natur nicht eine leibliche Versammlung ist, sondern eine Versammlung der Herzen in einem Glauben; WA 6, 292, 35-293, 4; LW 39, 65.}\]

\[^{14}\text{WA 6, 563, 7-9: Turpe enim est et iniquiter servile, Christianum hominem, qui liber est, aliis quam coelestibus ac divinis subjectum esse traditionibus. The quotations can be found in LW 36, 11-126.}\]

\[^{15}\text{WA 6, 561,19.}\]

\[^{16}\text{WA 6, 561, 3ff.}\]
have authority in relation to the word and any sacrament.\textsuperscript{17}

And interpreting 1 Peter 2:9, Luther explains it this way:

We are all priests before God, as much as we are Christians. For since we have been laid on the stone which became our high priest, we share everything that he owns.\textsuperscript{18}

This understanding of the priesthood of all believers implies two dimensions of Christian life. On one hand, the Christians are part of the new folk of God and share its promise for eternal salvation that Christ had merited for His people, the church. On the other hand Luther’s understanding of the priesthood of all believers implies that the Christians are entitled to the rights and duties that were maintained exclusively by the clergy in former times. With that, Luther destroyed the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the foundation of the medieval church.\textsuperscript{19}

As a consequence, Luther finally denied the legitimacy of the consecration and the associated understanding of the character indelibilis. Ordination is no Sacrament. It is an invention of the church and without divine legitimacy. Rather a man becomes a priest through Baptism: “We all become priests through the consecration of the baptism.”\textsuperscript{20} This vision of the church constituted by its believers has a strong spiritualistic tendency. Thus it was just a question of time before Luther would be confronted with the radical consequences of his ecclesiology. The challenge came quickly and forced Luther to consider another essential aspect of the ministry.

The Necessity of the Ministry

Even though Luther in his early years accentuated the priesthood of all believers and a more spiritualistic view of the church against Rome, he never lost the point of a special ministry in the church. He never denied a special vocation and ordination of individuals for a specific duty. Luther was—as a man of the late medieval era—deeply convinced that the church has its own order which had to be followed. Even before the radical challenge

\textsuperscript{17}WA 6, 566, 26-28: Esto itaque certus et sese agnoscat quicunque se Christianum esse cognoveri, omnes nos quequaliter esse sacerdotes, hoc est eandem in verbo et sacramento quoqucunque habere potestatem.

For the status questionis in the recent research about Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers see Harald Goertz, Allgemeines Priestertum und ordiniertes Amt bei Luther (Marburg, 1997).

\textsuperscript{18}WA 12, 317, 6-8: “Alle sind wyr priester fur Gott, so wyr Christen sind. Denn syntemal wyr auff den steyn gelegt sind, wilcher der ubirst priester fur Gott ist, so haben wyr auch alles, was er hatt.”

\textsuperscript{19}See Luther’s more elaborated discussion of this theory in his “De instituendis ministris,” WA 12, 169-196; LW 40, 7-44.

\textsuperscript{20}WA 6, 407, 22f. (An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation..., 1520) LW 44, 123-217.
erupted, Luther already had written in his “Babylonian Captivity of the Church”:

But it is not allowed that everyone individually uses this potestas without being asked by the community or without a call through one of the elders. (Because what belongs to all of the community is not for one alone, and he is not allowed to take it exclusively without being called to do so.)

There are several other passages with the same meaning. Luther targeted that view of reforming the church aimed especially against the radical reform movements with their spiritualistic or political background such as Andreas Karlstadt, Michael Stifel, Gabriel Zwilling, and Müntzer. Already before the outbreak of the Wittenberg disturbances Luther wrote to the Christian nobility:

Because we are all alike as priests, no one stands up on his own and without proper consent of the community and calling and does things that everyone can do with the same authority. Those things that are common should no one exclusively claim without allowance of the community or without special calling.

The contexts targeted in these critiques are clear. There remains the exclusivistic self-understanding of the Roman clergy. And then in the early 1520s a new frontline opposing that mainstream Reformation in Wittenberg was established by the radicals. On that other side we find a great number of former friends and colleagues of Luther, most notably Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, a most prominent preacher and one-time university professor. He accented a more spiritual understanding of church and ministry and denied all forms of ritual, order, and legitimizing administration. Against those, the above-mentioned arguments of Luther are seen in a new light. Not only the exclusive claim for a special standing and order in society but also now the radical assaults on the necessity of a ministry and church ordinances come into play.

Quoting 1 Corinthians 14:40 Luther emphasized two arguments: first, the public nature of the church life, and second, the general order which God created and which Christians as much as heathens need to obey. Both arguments are linked together: right order in the church is a model for right order of society. As far as the Christians obey the divine Law, so far

21 WA 6, 566, 32f.: Verum non licere quenquam hac ipsa uti nisi consensu communitatis and vocacione maioris. (Quod nim omnium est communiter, nullus singulariter potest sivi arrogare, donec vocetur.)

22 WA 6, 408, 13-17: wyl wir alle gleich priester sein, musz sich niemandt selb erfur thun und sich unterwinden, an unszer bewilligen und erwelen, das zuthun, des wir alle glechen gewalt haben. Den was gemeyne ist, mag niemandt ohn der gemeyne wille und befehle an sich nehmen.
will the society in which they live flourish and grow. Luther thus emphasizes an argument based on the Pauline conception of the early church, that the rights and duties that belong to all Christians likewise for the reason of maintaining proper order must be used in common by all members of a congregation.

This seems to be a contradiction: on the one hand Luther criticized the Roman clergy for proclaiming an exclusive special ministry, and, on the other hand, he argues for the necessity of a special ministry. But there is, in fact, a deeper relationship or tie. Luther argues using the priesthood of all believers based on the Scripture against a Roman claim of potestas, while that special ministry Luther never denied is necessary to continue the ecclesiastical duties in the Reformation.

Some modern researchers call Luther’s view of the ministry “functional.” That understands the ministry as a pragmatic creation of the priesthood of all believers where the priesthood sees needs—functions—to be managed and so sets something to get the jobs done. But the ministry is more than that for Luther, and I doubt that these sociological categories fit exactly with Luther’s understanding. Luther was neither an heir of the Bielefeld school of sociology familiar to us Germans, nor was he a systematic theologian. Rather with Scriptural principles or Biblical theology undergirding his thought, Luther speaks to occasions or problems, arguing in the context of controversies, responding to circumstances as he tries to advance the Biblical view against the traditionalist interpretation of the Roman Catholic theologians.

So what are the main aspects of Luther’s understanding of the ministry?

To be a priest means nothing else than to be a minister of the Word. Of the Word, I said, not of the Law but of the Gospel.23

First of all, the authority of a priest is based on the Word contained in the Scripture. A priest is not a priest in his own right. Nor is he a priest by virtue of participating with the authority of other humans. Rather a priest becomes a priest through the Word of promise that has been said to him in the Baptism. And this Word is the Gospel.

Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel cannot be discussed in full.24 But let us briefly sketch Luther’s important ideas. “Gospel” in Luther’s understanding means the promise of salvation that is brought to mankind through Christ. Thus every sentence of the Bible that leads to the

---

23WA 6, 566, 32f.: Sacerdotium proprie esse non nisi minsterium verbi, verbi, inquam, non legis sed Evangelii.
24For a more extended explanation see Albrecht Peters, Gesetz und Evangelium (Gütersloh, 1981), and with respect to the patristic and medieval tradition the last study of Bernhard Lohse, “Gesetz und Gnade—Gesetz und Evangelium.” in Evangelium in der Geschichte II: Studien zur Theologie der Kirchenväter und zu ihrer Rezeption in der Reformation (Göttingen, 1998), 231-254.
understanding of salvation coming to the sinner and the message of the merciful God has to be interpreted as Gospel. In contrast or distinction to the Gospel, the Law accuses and shows the everlasting sin of mankind. Every sentence of the Scripture that leads to man’s self-understanding as a sinner has to be interpreted as Law. This distinction is not a static or an ontological one but a hermeneutical one: no sentence of the Bible has a static, fixed objective meaning as if we simply add up vocabulary words, for the Bible’s sentences are the lively Word of God that is spoken to me in a very special moment and context. Thus a sentence can be heard as Gospel and yet in the same time be understood as Law. Here is an example. The First Commandment that declares “I am your God; You shall not have any other,” can be understood as Law: “You must not look to other gods. You need to be exclusively obedient to the Lord. If you fail, this causes terrible punishment. What is the last authority for you? Do you listen to God or to your own understanding, reason, self-confidence, etc.? If you do so, you failed and you are a sinner.” That, again, is Law. At the same time you can listen to the First Commandment as Gospel: “You don’t need to look for other gods. I will be with you and support you in any situation. I will give all you need. If you feel lonely, just turn around and find my face in the face of your neighbor, for I have not created you to be alone. No matter what your reason, self-understanding, your conscience, etc., may sow as doubt, keep calm, for I will be with you. And I will have the victory, for I am your God.” Those are the same vocabulary words in the text of the commandment, but the meaning in this case is Gospel.

Luther’s understanding of the ministry is closely linked to that distinction. The priest has to serve the Word. He has to preach the Gospel. Again the frontline is clear: it is not the duty of a priest to be a ruler, to correct people, to judge their lives, and intervene in the concrete plans. That is what the Roman clergy did with their intervention in political, cultural, and other secular matters. The Roman clerics were not alone. The radicals did the same in their translating of the Old Testament commands word for word into their contemporary, concrete situations in Wittenberg, Mühlhausen, or Orlamünde. Instead, Luther insisted, the duty of a priest is to take care for the Gospel so that it is carried out into the world. And in the collective public life of the Christian congregation with all its believers, that public duty is carried out by the minister.

But from this work of proclamation, some interpreters then take a “functionalist view” of the minister and ministry. As mentioned above, this is not adequate, for Luther laid out a concrete view of a minister in an office which is there for serving, for making known “the Word in function.” We have to look at this in a bit more detail.

**Call and Ordination**

No one can lay claim to the special ministry of serving the Word by his own authority. The priest needs to be called and ordained. Even though
Luther denied a special consecration and rejected an indelible character, he emphasized the vocation and demanded a formal act of ordination because of the need for right order: “Ordination means nothing else than to call and to order into the ministry of the Word.”

We have to distinguish two steps: call and ordination. For Luther the community of all believers has the highest authority, humanly speaking, in the church: the minister has to be called by the local parish. Responsibility for the ministry as a whole rests with the church which is concrete in the local congregation. Thus the local community has to find its ministers for preaching, teaching, pastoral care, etc. After 1527—the visitations in Saxony that revealed a disastrous picture of the church in the electoral territory—Luther understood the necessity for a complete reform and a new constitution of the ministry. Luther had said already in 1524:

> We will preach and ordain in another way than these bishops. Because we have already a ministry, we will ordain on that basis. Ordination does not mean consecration. If we know a pious man, we will call him and give to him in the power of the Word what we have already: the authority to preach the Word and to distribute the Sacraments. That is what it means to ordain.

Luther put this understanding of the call into practice with the ordination of Georg Rörer: Luther ordained the man on the fourteenth of May 1524 in the city church of Wittenberg as deacon. After the formal calling he laid his hands on Rörer and prayed for the benediction of God on his ministry.

Even though there was no formally constituted procedure, Luther tried to find a right order. In his formulary for the ordination of evangelical ministers and his sermon from October 20, 1535, Luther emphasized three fundamental acts which constitute the ordination:

1. the Baptism.
2. the call of a local congregation.
3. the acknowledgement of the legitimacy in a public service through a high ecclesiastical authority (bishop, superintendent, etc.).

This understanding of ordination implies the obedience to the Word of Christ, for Christ is the one who acts through His ministers in the church:

---

25WA 38, 401: Ordinirn sol heissen beruffen und befelhen das Pfarrampt.
27WA 38, 423ff.
28WA 41, 454ff.
"The ministry is of Christ, who establishes them."\textsuperscript{29}

No Character Indelibilis

Therefore ordination does not change the character or ability of an ordained Christian. It is the obedience to the call of God—formulated in the call of the parish—that demands future obedience to the will of God by the one ordained. Thus a minister can fall like all other Christians by not following the commands of God but instead by pursuing his own understanding and will. To avoid such failure the church has to watch out for candidates who may fall into trouble and to protect their parishes as well as themselves from the temptation of evil.\textsuperscript{30}

The priest serves as a minister of the Word as long as the parish needs his service. He becomes a normal parishioner again—not reduced to a "mere layman" but a priest like all others priests with him—the moment the parish calls and ordains another candidate or finds a strong reason that he does not preach the true Gospel. This argument has an anti-Donatist accent: the ministry is not linked to any individual constitution of the person who is ordained. Neither is some special ability needed, nor, as noted above, does ordination constitute a special behavior or charisma connected exclusively to the minister.

The Duties of a Minister

The Augsburg Confession describes the duties of a minister as "docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta," that is, teaching the Gospel and administering/distributing the Sacraments. This sounds almost like the medieval ordination liturgy, but there is an important difference: for Luther and the Wittenberg Reformation the Word has the last authority, and this authority cannot be divided. Thus a minister is subordinated to the Word and has to be judged in all dimensions of his life in the light of the Scriptures. The minister himself has no power/authority over other people. His duties are to comfort the mourning, to console the depressed, to bring the promise of redemption to those who seek redemption, to carry forth into the world the Word of the merciful God with its promise of salvation:

For Christ did not found empires, nor powers, nor rich and wealthy lordships in his church, but he established serving ministers as we have learned from the apostles.... He calls for faith in the confessing

\textsuperscript{29}WA 41, 242: Die empter sind Christi, qui instituit.

\textsuperscript{30}WA 41, 457f.: Noster princeps hat geordnet..., ut priester nicht geweiht wird nobis ignorantibus, Ut in primitiva Ecclesia musten verbieten nec ubique weihten und eundeins wurde cum pseudoapostolis und lieff davon.... Ideo estote testes, quod ordinatus, et schicken hin gen Gotta.... Debetis orare, ut dominus maneat pfarrer, teuffer, Sacramentsreicher, i.e., ut serventur, ut ordinavit.
sinner, that this man, when he receives redemption in faith, comes through the promise to deep security of the realization of the salvation in the end of the times. This is not a question of power (potestas), but a question of the ministry of him who can give redemption alone.31

The ministry of the word makes a priest and a bishop.32

Luther destroyed the ecclesiastical hierarchy. But he still emphasized the necessity of different duties in the church. In the Roman understanding, the full ministry is possessed by the pope. He divides his power and authority to the bishops and they again to their clergy. Thus a pyramid-shaped model of the ecclesiastical hierarchy describes the Roman system with the pope at its top and the deacons, etc., down at the bottom. There is no doubt where power and authority ultimately reside.

Luther turned this system upside down. With respect to the early church (ecclesia primitiva) he understands the Christian hierarchy as a functional relationship and not as an order of individual dignity and ability. On top are the believers, the community of hearts in one faith. It divides or commits its authority to the called and ordained ministers. They again or in turn elect one candidate as pastor pastorum, as a bishop or superintendent. He has to serve as minister ministrorum. What are his duties?

In several letters Luther addressed his friends, colleagues, and other priests as “bishop.” It is astonishing how many people Luther called “bishop.” What did this term of address imply for Luther’s understanding of the leading ministry in the church? Let me briefly sketch the results that emerge after analyzing his letters.33

1. Because Luther addressed several non-bishops as “episcopus,” we have an indication that he understood that there was a leading ministry in the church. But because he used this title without or apart from a formal system or legal, established structure, we have to be quite careful not to over-interpret these letters and read too much into them.

2. It seems clear that Luther addressed ministers of cities as bishops or superintendents. But this does not establish a hard and fast rule for the title: Luther did not address every minister of a city as

31Non enim imperia, non potestates, non dominationes, sed ministeria in Ecclesia sua constituit, sicut ex Apostolo didicimus...fidem provocat poenitentis, ut hoc promissionis verbo certus sit, si solveretur credens, vere solutum se esse in caelo, ubi plane nihil potestatis, sed ministerium tangitur absolventis (De capt. Bayl.).

32WA 6, 566, 9: Ministerium verbi facit sacerdotum et Episcopum.

bishop. Even though the title of bishop for the minister of a city hearkens back to the ancient times of the early church, we do not have a real proof that Luther saw this link. He certainly did not use the title automatically.

3. A survey of the letters in which Luther used “bishop” as title for a minister gives some brief indication of what Luther outlined as the duties of a leading or supervising minister.

He has to administer and to organize the local congregation. Luther emphasized especially the need to reform the liturgy, preaching and teaching and the abolition of non-Biblically based rites and ceremonies.

The bishop has to find the right candidates for the many duties in his congregation: teacher, preacher, sextons, deacons, etc. He has to care for these ministers, to guarantee their income, to care for their families, to judge their teaching and preaching.

The bishop has to mediate between colleagues when they are at odds, and he should arbitrate and settle differences over the right interpretation of the Gospel and doctrine. He also should mediate between ecclesiastical and secular interests and authorities.

The bishop has to teach and to preach. His ministry is based on the ministry of his priests. Thus he has to be a forerunner or model of their administration.

The bishop has to care not only for his ministers but also for difficult cases in his parish, especially questions of marriage and divorce.

The bishop represents the congregation in “ecumenical” contexts with other parishes or with other churches.

There is no clear distinction between a minister and a bishop in the light of Luther’s letters. A closer look at his books and tracts does not provide a more satisfying definition. It seems that Luther does not want to draw clear distinctions or create some great divide, for he understands the bishop as a minister and a minister as a priest like all other Christians. Their duties distinguish the ministers functionally but not on the basis of a different condition or nature of their being. Luther kept his view of the ministry open. This all makes sense in the light of the early Reformation and the often-chaotic situation that befell a number of parishes in Saxony. Luther had solid ideas drawn from Biblical evidence. He applied those to various circumstances or occasions. The duties he outlines as noted here certainly have a feel that reflects his time, place, and situation. But what
Luther generally hesitates to do is to fix administrative orders, to elaborate structures. They then can easily become a new law that extinguishes the Gospel in the church.

**Conclusion**

I have tried to show what Luther envisioned as an evangelical church and how he understood the ministry. There are two lines that are closely intermingled. The one line is Luther’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. The other is his conviction of the necessity of the ministry. These two lines are not contradictory. Rather, they complete each other. This can be seen if one looks to the background controversies in which Luther accents one or the other. Against Rome Luther emphasized the priesthood of all believers to correct the non-Biblical understanding of the clergy and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Against the radicals and spiritualists Luther stressed the argument for an ordained ministry to avoid spiritualistic chaos or radical revolts. The ministry could not be dismissed as unnecessary or hijacked by any or all simply driven by their imaginations.

It became the duty of Philipp Melanchthon, Nikolaus von Amsdorf, and others to establish or organize an evangelical church. They did it by amending, concentrating, interpreting, and discussing the position of Luther. It is clear that they were not out to establish a Lutheran church, even though it was called so later on. What they did do was to implement, expand, and build on a highly polemical and prophetic sketch Luther left to them. Regularizing fell to them as the dust settled. Thus it seems inappropriate to criticize Luther for the results of the Reformation or to argue against Melanchthon and his followers on the basis of Luther’s early tracts and sermons. The situation had changed, and new challenges provoked new answers.

Therefore, I cannot say that Luther’s ecclesiology must be explored and invoked “as is” as the solution to all the problems of our churches today. But we certainly must read Luther as a witness of true belief, as a preacher of the Gospel. We also can find with Luther a way back into the Scriptures and through the Word come to solutions for our own problems. Don’t make Luther a saint. But do let Luther be what he became for Lutherans and for many other Christians: a father in faith.