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Review article

Peter Lockwood Victor C. Pfitzner. *Early Christian Witnesses: Biblical and Theological Explorations. Selected Essays by Victor C Pfitzner.* Adelaide: ATF Press, 2021. 105

Abbreviations

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| AC | Augsburg Confession |
| CTICR | Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations |
| FC Epit. | Epitome of the Formula of Concord |
| LCA | Lutheran Church of Australia |
| SC | Small Catechism |
| TA | Theses of Agreement |
| Tractate | Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope |

Commonly cited works

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|------------------------|--|
| DSTO | Lutheran Church of Australia, Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations. <i>Doctrinal Statements and Theological Opinions.</i> https://www.lca.org.au/departments/commissions/cticr/ . |
| Kolb and Wengert | Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.</i> Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. |
| LCA By-laws | Lutheran Church of Australia. <i>Constitution and By-laws.</i> 2018. https://www.lca.org.au/about-us/structure-governance/ . |
| LCA Constitution | Lutheran Church of Australia. <i>Constitution and By-laws.</i> 2018. https://www.lca.org.au/about-us/structure-governance/ . |
| Tappert | Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.</i> Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959. |
| Theses of Agreement VI | Lutheran Church of Australia, DSTO Volume 1 A. <i>Theses of Agreement. VI: Theses on the office of the ministry</i> (1950). |

(God's) ordering of ministry in the church

Adam D. Hensley

In the church today it is common to encounter a line of thinking that goes something like this. God has instituted the pastoral ministry, but the church has freedom to order its ministry according to its needs. There is some truth to this of course. The church does have freedom to 'order' much of its ministry activity. But this also oversimplifies and even confuses the matter. To assess this freedom accurately and exercise it faithfully requires coming to grips with some prior questions: Is there an 'office of the ministry', or has God just instituted 'preaching word' and 'administering the sacraments' as things to be done and left the 'how' up to the church? What *has* God already ordered in respect to the pastoral ministry? And what has God said about who is eligible for it and who is not? What else does the Holy Spirit teach about ministry in the church?

To these questions and more, the *Theses of Agreement VI* on the office of the ministry provide rich and deeply scriptural answers. First, and most basically, TA VI makes it clear that there is indeed an office of the ministry 'instituted by Christ for the public administration of the means of grace, that is, the preaching of the Gospel and administering of the sacraments' (TA VI.1). TA VI.1 recognises this, for example, in Jesus' calling and commissioning of the Twelve in Matthew 10 (and Luke 9:1–2) and Jesus' directly charging the Eleven to baptise, teach, etc., in the Great Commission in Matt 28:16–20. Accordingly, TA VI.2 continues, '[t]he office of the ministry is therefore an office instituted not by man, but by God,' citing, among other texts, Paul's teaching about his apostolic ministry of reconciliation as an 'ambassador' of Christ in 2 Cor 5:18–20, and Christ's gifts to the church in Eph 4:11. Further, TA VI.6 shows why and how the office of the ministry is *apostolic*: 'According to the New Testament the spiritual functions of the Apostolate are continued only in the ministry of the Word and Sacraments.'¹ According to Jesus' commissioning, the apostles are to 'teach them to observe all I have commanded' (Matt 28:20). This includes when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper and told the apostles to '*do this* in remembrance of me,' commanding both the reception of the Supper for the forgiveness of sins *and* that the apostles and their successors in the apostolic ministry should preside over it as he was doing that holy night. Pastors presiding at the Lord's Supper serve in Christ's stead and by his command in this particular way as the people of God gather as *Christ's* guests to receive the life-giving gift for the forgiveness of their sins. As pastors admit communicants to the sacrament and in other ways (e.g., absolution), they publicly exercise the office of the keys (TA VI.4; Matt 16:15–19; John 20:19–23). Yet this does not make pastors 'better'; rather, in the particulars of their vocation, pastors

1 TA VI.6 cites numerous NT texts regarding this. In Acts 14:23, for example, Paul and Barnabas appoint 'elders' (πρεσβυτέρους) who according to 1 Tim 5:17 (another text TA VI.6 cites) 'labour in word and teaching' (see further below).

are servants, washing God's people's feet (John 13). As TA VI.3 well states: 'the office of the ministry is an office, which is simultaneous with the Church and to which the Church is bound from its beginning to the end of time.' The office of the ministry and the church belong together.

Scripture also teaches who is eligible for the office of the ministry. This is clear from the pastoral epistles, which teach several things about ministry in the church. 1 Timothy 3:1–7 is worth hearing in full:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer (ἐπίσκοπή), he desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer (ἐπίσκοπος) must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (ESV)

Several points bear noting. First, the term translated 'office of overseer' (ἐπίσκοπή) can refer to the office or activity of 'oversight',² and is related to 'overseer' (ἐπίσκοπος) who practices 'oversight' in the Christian congregation (1 Tim 3:2). Oversight of the church is not some kind of abstract principle to be implemented according to our preference or convenience, but a grounded concrete task to be done by a person—an *episkopos*, who is authorised to oversee God's household. Needless to say, words like 'episcopate' and 'episcopal' derive from these terms, which is why some translations render them '(office of) bishop'.³ We can therefore hear this too narrowly, especially given the fairly recent change of nomenclature from 'presidents' to 'bishops' in the LCANZ applying the term to synodical leaders. Paul, though, applies this term *episkopos* to the local 'pastor' who oversees the worshipping congregation wherein prayers, public preaching/teaching, etc. take place, led by Christ, the one Mediator between God and people [1 Tim 2:5,8,12]). So when we apply the term 'bishop' as we do in the LCANZ, we stretch a term that applies first to the parish ministry context to those overseeing a district or the whole synod, which is also 'the church' in a broader sense. The difference is the *location* of service, not what the office of oversight *is*. As the Lutheran Confessions attest, there is just one office of oversight responsible for teaching and preaching in the church (AC 5). The church is 'free' to order it in terms of jurisdiction, then, but cannot alter its core purpose and nature. God has already determined that by His Word.

Second, not everyone is eligible for this office. Most of what we find in 1 Tim 3:1–7 concerns godly character and life. But the overseer's 'own household' (τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου) also comes

2 See Walter Bauer and William F. Arndt, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἐπίσκοπή, ἤς, ἡ.

3 So the KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV; NIV and NASB translate 'overseer' like the ESV.

into it, as does the ‘ability to teach’ (διδασκτικόν). As to the first, he should be the ‘husband of one wife’ if he is to ‘take care of’ (ἐπιμελέομαι) the *church of God* (ἐκκλησίας θεοῦ)—something he is unfit to do if he’s a polygamist or hasn’t got his own household in order. As to the second, ‘able to teach’ (διδασκτικόν), Paul has also just explained that ‘it is not permitted for a woman to teach or have authority over a man’ (1 Tim 2:12) when instructing Christian men and women concerning their participation in worship. Paul’s expectation that the *episkopos* be the ‘husband of one wife’, manage his own household well, and ‘able to teach’ (1 Tim 3:2) thus follows on the heels of his prior instructions about worship in ch. 2.⁴

Third, an *episkopos* serves alongside others whom Paul also expects to be ‘dignified, not double tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain’ and who ‘must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience...tested...blameless’ (1 Tim 3:8–10). Paul calls such people *deacons* (Διακόνοι) and speaks of deaconesses (Γυναῖκας)⁵ in similar terms. The diaconal vocation thus lies open to eligible men and women, and through it they have a particular calling to ‘serve well (καλῶς)...gain a good standing (βαθμὸν...καλὸν) for themselves and also great confidence (πολλὴν παρρησίαν) in the faith that is in Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim 3:13).

Fourth, Paul treats ‘deacon(ess)’ and *episkopos* as distinct, complementary vocations in the church, as he does in Phil 1:1. Specifically, ‘able to teach’ is missing from the expectations of deacons and deaconesses. Also missing is an expectation that they ‘care for God’s church’ as His household. This vocation is not a teaching office of oversight like that of *episkopos* or its equivalent ‘elder’ (πρεσβύτερος), what we call the pastoral office.⁶ So, though often put forward as a *de facto* pastor, Phoebe—a deaconess at Cenchreae (Rom 16:1)—occupied a vocation not responsible for these things and not to be confused with that of overseer/elder/pastor of a congregation. Similarly, we read a bit later in the letter that ‘elders’ (πρεσβύτεροι) ‘labour in preaching and teaching (ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ)’ (1 Tim 5:17), in keeping with Paul’s description of an *episkopos* in 1 Timothy 3. That Paul recognises the same office in these two terms is clear also from Acts 20. There Paul addresses ‘the elders (πρεσβυτέρους) of the church’ at Ephesus (v. 17), telling them to ‘[p]ay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (ἐπισκόπους), to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood’ (Acts 20:28, ESV).

4 So TA VI.11. For a fuller discussion of these issues see Adam D. Hensley, ‘Divine blessing and order in marriage and the church,’ *Lutheran Theological Journal* 54, no. 1 (May 2020): 43–59; and ‘σῖγάω, λαλέω, and ὑποτάσσω in 1 Corinthians 14:34 in their literary and rhetorical context,’ *JETS* 55, no. 2 (2012): 343–364.

5 On Γυναῖκας referring to female deacons rather than the wives of deacons see, e.g., Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 90; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017), 133–34.

6 See further Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 182–191.

Looking in the mirror

This is a good place to stop and ask some questions of ourselves as LCANZ. First, how are we equipping people to serve in diaconal ministry today? Much of what might be called ‘diaconal ministry’ takes place under other names like ‘lay-worker’, ‘pastoral assistant’, etc. (cf. TA VI.9). Yet the church and ALC has long ceased offering any formal diaconal training programs or commissioned people with the biblical vocation of ‘deacon(ess)’.⁷ This is to our loss, both collectively as a church and for those men and women who yearn for legitimate, biblical, God-pleasing ways to serve in God’s church and might do so as deacons and deaconesses ‘with great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim 3:13). Despite grassroots interest in reviving recognised diaconal ministry, however, nothing seems to be happening. Why is this? Have we so exhausted ourselves debating the ordination of women to *the pastoral office* that we have no energy, inclination, or imagination left to form women and men for diaconal ministry? Is there a concern among some that formally recognising diaconal ministry would distract from endeavours to ordain women into the *pastoral office*? Are we witnessing an ‘all or nothing’ approach where nothing ‘less’ than the ordained ministry will do, and where diaconal ministry is considered an inferior, lesser vocation than that of the pastoral office? If so, from where does such thinking come? Certainly not Christ and His Word, who did not consider ‘equality’ a thing to be grasped (Phil 2:5).

Second, we need to ask ourselves how well we are practicing what we preach. In principle, we accept ‘without reservation the Old and New Testaments, as a whole and in their parts, as the divinely inspired, written and inerrant Word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine, and life.’⁸ In practice, however, we seem to have great difficulty looking to the Word alone (*sola scriptura*) to arbitrate between our different thoughts on these matters and subject our consciences to it (judging and saving, as the Word always does).⁹ The women’s ordination debate, for example, is often framed as people having different perspectives on what the Word means and reaching different exegetical conclusions. However not all ‘exegeses’ are equally *exegetical* or attentive to that most basic of Lutheran hermeneutical concerns: the plain sense of the text.¹⁰ In the LCANZ’s debate over the years, we find a pattern of explaining away the apostolic commands in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 as cultural or pastoral measures limited in scope, despite numerous indications otherwise, and Paul’s providing his own rationale for prohibiting women from publicly teaching in worship. At the same time Gal 3:28 has been routinely extracted from its *baptismal* context—where Paul argues against Judaizers who

7 The Shepperton congregation’s calling of Deaconess Kathleen Mills is an inspiring exception.

8 LCA Constitution, Article 2.

9 Cf. FC Epit. 7: ‘Holy Scripture remains the only *judge*, rule, and norm according to which as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and *judged* as good or evil, right or wrong’ (Tappert: 465; italics added).

10 Unlike medieval theologians who tried to ‘decipher’ biblical texts according to a system of coded meanings, the reformers, beginning with Luther, returned to reading the actual words and grammar of the biblical text, asking: what does this say? What is its plain meaning? Since this reform happened, understanding the plain sense of the text (*sensus literalis*) has always been the primary task of exegeting the text among Lutherans.

insisted on (male) circumcision for gentile converts—to make ‘neither male nor female’ serve as the interpretive key for his instruction on the ordering of ministry in the church in other texts. Such disregard for text and context is not good exegesis.¹¹

A listening church?

In the church today we hear a desire and encouragement to ‘dwell in’ the Word. Interestingly, scripture puts it the other way around: we are to ‘let the word of Christ *dwell in us* (ἐνοικείτω ἐν ὑμῖν) richly’ (Col 3:16). That starts with being still and simply *listening* to it (Pss 50:7; 85:8), out loud and with our ears. But consider: when was the last time you heard the pastoral epistles read aloud from start to finish in your congregation? What about 1 Timothy 2–3 discussed above? If with the rest of the LCANZ your congregation follows the *Revised Common Lectionary*, then you haven’t heard a syllable from 1 Tim 2:8 all the way through to 6:5, or anything from 1 Corinthians 14, for decades. The biblical teachings found throughout these chapters are not the flavour of the month; in biblical parlance they are ‘out of season’ (2 Tim 4:2). So despite our need for the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), the church has quite literally not been listening to these texts as the Word of God for its instruction in our liturgical life, only pulled apart and scrutinised in synodical debates. This is an issue for all Christendom, not just us Lutherans.

The discussions and debates over ministry in the LCANZ are many things, but like every controversy that has beset God’s church they are, above all, a call to return to the scriptures that we may observe all our Lord has commanded us for our blessing (Matt 28:20).

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¹¹ Disregarding the proper context of Gal 3:28 raises other concerns too. Those who argue this way have so far (usually) stopped short of applying it to questions of human sexuality and gender. But it’s not clear what prevents ‘neither male nor female’—so extracted from its Galatians context—from becoming the lens through which one reinterprets biblical teaching on these other issues also.