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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

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

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).

Ordering the church's ministry: Luther's priorities

Roger Whittall*

For the Lutheran churches, the ordering of ministry presents constant challenges at the same time as it offers intriguing opportunities. From the episcopal continuity of the Scandinavian churches, right through to the ardent congregationalism of the American 'independents', all the possibilities for church order can be claimed and sanctioned by the simple statement of article fourteen of the *Augsburg Confession*, that 'no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called'.¹ Somewhere in the middle rests the LCANZ, with its tradition of benign clericalism mitigated somewhat by its synodical structures.

Much weight rests on the shoulders of the phrase 'properly called'. A footnote to the Kolb and Wengert translation suggests that the Latin (*rite vocatus*) meant 'called in a regular manner by a proper public authority'.² But what is 'regular' and what now constitutes 'a proper public authority'? The way these questions are answered goes some way to determining how the church will be ordered, so that the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. That is always the bottom line for the *Confession* itself and thus also for us.³

First of all, Melancthon's deliberately terse statement needs to be understood in its historical context. Following Luther's protest and excommunication, this was a reformational situation in which the German churches sought to reestablish God's work in Christ through Word and Sacraments as the very heart and centre of the church's worship and mission. In the face of opposition from bishops appointed by Rome, these churches were claiming the right to ordain and appoint their own evangelically-trained pastors and preachers. So the *Confession*, in keeping with Luther's priorities, uses the language of an orderly call to ministry, rather than emphasising ordination to the established ranks of the clergy.

The rest is, indeed, history—and there is neither time nor space to rehearse the manifold ways in which the differing understandings of call, ordination, and appointment to ministry have been practised in the variously-structured Lutheran churches from 1530 to the present day. It is enough to note that unlike other branches of the Christian family, Lutherans have resisted the temptation to make church order central to our teaching of the gospel, or indeed to our understanding of the church. Under the Spirit's guidance, the responsibility for the ordering of ministry now rests within the churches themselves. Here and now, in contemporary Australia, the challenge for the LCANZ is to honour the teaching inherent in its confession at the same time as we re-examine its possibilities in the midst of a twin

* This work follows on from Roger Whittall's previous article, 'Boundaries and horizons: Luther on the church and its Priesthood,' *Lutheran Theological Journal* 55, no. 3 (Dec 2021): 127–138.

1 AC 14 (Kolb and Wengert: 47).

2 AC 14 (Kolb and Wengert: 47 n81). This phrase, with its German equivalent (16th-century German: '*ordentlicher beruf*'; modern German: '*ordentliche Berufung*'), was at that time applicable to any public office, and not only that of pastor or preacher. This usage also included—for every office—the sense of being called by God.

3 See the preceding articles of the *Confession*, especially 5 and 7 on the church and its ministry.

resources crisis: the dwindling numbers of both pastors and people.

We should not fool ourselves. Neither set of numbers will rebound, not unless there is a major—probably catastrophic—upheaval in the culture, values, and priorities of our Western societies. And that (thank God!) is beyond our control. Rather, for us the challenge is to discern and enact faithful and effective ways in which we can now embrace the realities of being *nano-church*. More than ever, as Christians we are salt and light in a dying world, living by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and sharing as best we can his life and his blessing. As that happens, it seems likely that the outward configurations of the church and its public ministry will be quite different from our previous practice. That model—the pastor-preacher fulfilling or supervising every aspect of ministry in a stable parish/congregational setting—probably worked well enough for the close-knit social settings of sixty or one hundred years ago, but those are now the realms of ‘once-upon-a-time’ and the roles of pastors and teachers have been transformed by times of rapid change. Not least they now lead best from *within* the Christian community, rather than seeing themselves as being placed *over* God’s people.

Luther himself lived through flux and upheaval, the transition from the medieval to the early modern world and the questioning of traditional hierarchies and authorities. His key biblical insights into church and ministry, developed as he wrestled with the need to reform parish structures along evangelical lines, remind us of what must be retained, and what can be let go, or change. In every age, however, the church trims her sails to meet the winds of social [r]evolution, her true course is set by the gospel and its purposes alone.

First of all—even before the crisis of reform—Luther developed the understanding that it is the nature of the church as *communio*, a fellowship of believers united in Christ and His Word, that must always have first place. This determines, shapes and legitimises the institutional character of the church, its offices and traditions, its worship and its religious practices, rather than vice versa. Working from that insight, in 1520 he wrote in *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*,

All Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12 that we are all one body, yet every member has its own work by which it serves the others. This is because we all have one baptism, one gospel, one faith, and are all Christians alike; for baptism, gospel, and faith alone make us spiritual and a Christian people.⁴

Three years later, writing to assist the church authorities in Prague who were wrestling with their own problems regarding church order and the supply of evangelical pastors, he proves from scripture that in Christ’s church there is no exclusive or self-perpetuating clerical class, no spiritual elite bearing an ‘indelible character’ granted by ordination. Rather, the church’s seven-fold ministry (encompassing the preaching the Word, baptising, celebrating the Lord’s Supper, forgiving sins, living a life of sacrificial service, praying, and judging doctrine)⁵ is the common possession of all Christians—women and men,

4 WA 6:407 = LW 44:127. He also adds texts from Romans 12 (‘Present your bodies as living sacrifices’) and 1 Peter 2 (‘You are a royal priesthood’).

5 In differing situations, Luther varied his list of these ‘marks of the church’—but the Word always has

young and old—in which all participate on the basis of their baptism and according to their particular calling, life-situation and abilities. There are no other spiritual qualifications needed. Therefore, in the Christian community,

One, or as many as the community chooses, shall be chosen or approved who, in the name of all with these rights, shall undertake these offices publicly. Otherwise, there might be shameful confusion among the people of God, and a kind of Babylon in the church, where everything should be done in order, as the Apostle teaches. For it is one thing to exercise a right publicly; another to use it in time of emergency. Publicly one may not exercise a right without consent of the whole body or of the church.⁶

The need for order in the church remains, as a God-given gift and a fruit of its unity in Christ. However much we may feel impelled to adapt our structures of church and ministry to more flexible, inclusive and responsive ways of working, it is important that whoever serves publicly in the church's name does so with the assent, approval, and co-operation of the whole community.

'All things should be done decently and in order' (1 Cor 14:40) was prominent among Luther's foundational texts for ministry in the church, alongside 1 Corinthians 4:1 and Ephesians 4:7–13, with their emphasis on service, stewardship, and the gifts of God's grace in Christ through those who serve. He used all three texts throughout a lifetime of teaching and preaching, and they remain helpful signposts for our journey into the church's future as well.

As the LCANZ negotiates its way through its current difficulties, it is worth giving Luther's insights into church and ministry some prominence as we seek to maintain our confessional roots and its authentic tradition.

This means that we will always prioritise the Word and faith, the Spirit's unique gifts that alone create and form the church as the people of God, one body in Christ and the *communion of saints*. They remain our core business, the basis for our identity as Christians and as 'church' as well.

Then—as the Word does its work among us—people and pastors can share together in all the blessings and responsibilities of the gospel. Especially in our own 'time of emergency' those gifted for active participation in the community's ordered ministries will come to the fore, so that Jesus himself will continue to serve us. Preaching on John 20, Doctor Martin reminds us whose work this always is, entrusted to all God's people:

Christ gives the Holy Spirit to his whole church and Christendom—to the apostles and the apostles' successors, pastors, preachers, *yes to every Christian in time of need*—everything that pertains to the office, that they might preach, teach, comfort, forgive and retain sins: in sum that they might be sent just as the Father has sent him.⁷

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priority, and is foundational to every expression of ministry.

6 WA 12:189 = LW 40:34, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523). Translation altered; LW often translates 'function' where Luther has 'office' (*amt*). The service of the gospel is a gift and a task, a divine office that is the joyous responsibility of God's servants and not the work of mere 'functionaries'.

7 WA 28:470 = LW 69:358 (1529), emphasis added. See also WA 41:546 = LW 69:416 (1536), 'When they do it [pronounce absolution], Christ has done it.'