

Pfarramt, Geography, and the Order of the Church: A Formal Opinion from Wittenberg¹

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Translator’s Introduction

Although there remains general interest in the topic of the ministry among confessional Lutherans of North America, there is a lack of understanding concerning the details of the historical context on which much of the Reformation material on the ministry depends. This is related to the generally low familiarity with the Reformation languages, German and Latin. Together, these shortcomings have contributed to a lack of clarity among English-speaking American Lutherans regarding questions of the ministry and the use of Reformation material in doctrinal controversies on this topic. Without clarity of thought, there can be no progress. The translation of the following letter and of the Weimar

¹ Translated from *Luther, Bugenhagen und Spalatin an den Zwickauer Pfarrer Leonhard Beyer*, in *Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel*, 18 vols.

(Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1930–1985), 7:476–479 (hereafter WA Br) with reference to text of the St. Louis edition, *Unterricht daß geistlich und weltlich Regiment wohl unterschieden werden sollen &c.*, in *Dr. Martin Luther’s Sämmtliche Schriften*, ed. Joh. Georg Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880–1910), 10:264–267.

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edition introduction to it, as well as the inclusion of geographical concepts of church order, will help readers to understand this topic. Additionally, this letter may serve as a pattern and tool for understanding other Reformation materials frequently cited in the discussion of church and ministry among us.

This letter was composed on July 24, 1536, as a formal written theological opinion regarding an ongoing controversy between the parish rector (*Pfarrherr*) and the city council of Zwickau. The letter was signed and sent by Martin Luther (a faculty member of the University of Wittenberg), Johannes Bugenhagen (the parish rector of the church in Wittenberg), and Georg Spalatin (a longtime advisor to the elector and a visitor [examiner] of the University of Wittenberg and the churches of Saxony) to Leonhard Beyer, the parish rector of Zwickau. The opinion has been and continues to be of theological interest today within North American Lutheranism primarily on account of one particular sentence it contains, which has often been quoted in isolation to various ends.²

In addition to the opinion itself, Otto Clemen, the editor of the volume of the Weimar edition in which this letter appears, has provided a useful historical introduction to it. He also provides part of an interesting and useful absentee minority opinion given by Philip Melancthon. These, for the most part, are translated below.

A few observations will help to explain the context of this letter. First, it is often under-appreciated that there are geographic assumptions built into the language and

² Specifically, the Wittenberg theologians state that “no peace or unity can remain wherever the assistant preacher, the schoolmaster, and others who serve in the church, etc., know that they are able to be in the office of the church without the knowledge and will of the parish rector.” See below, p. 000.

concepts used to present the doctrines of church and ministry. In the New Testament, Paul wrote to “the church of God residing in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1).³ When an average North American reads this phrase, he generally relates this to what he sees and experiences within his own setting. He thinks of a singular assembly defined physically for the most part by one building or, perhaps, by one parking lot. But it is likely that the phrase is equivalent to Paul’s other opening greetings, wherein he greets the “saints” or “beloved of God” in a geographic region, which is often a city⁴ or something like “the church made up of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1).

From all indications, in this early period of the young Christian movement, it was common for Christians to gather for worship, prayer, and reading the Scriptures in private homes (e.g., Acts 20:20; Rom 16:5), probably due in part to the great cost of building and maintaining a physical structure for sizable groups. In a larger city, this implies that there were multiple such churches or Christian assemblies within the one city.⁵ In the centuries that followed, this multi-assembly situation was certainly the functioning model in the

³ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are my translation.

⁴ E.g., “all those who are beloved of God in Rome” (Rom 1:7), “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (Phil 1:1), “the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who reside in Colossae” (Col 1:2).

⁵ Paul greets the “bishops” of Philippi (Phil 1:1). Multiple times while writing to the church or believers in a certain location, he greets a particular church meeting in a particular house, which is not the same as the entire local audience to whom the letter is written, e.g., Rom 16:5; Col 4:15. In Phlm 1:2, Paul greets another house church.

very large cities of Rome and Alexandria; we know at least small bits about multiple groupings of the church in those cities even up to the early third century.⁶

In the earliest period, it is likely that many individual assemblies or small groupings of such assemblies had their own leaders, the “bishops and deacons” (Phil 1:1) of a city. But in the following two centuries, the groups or congregations within a city typically came to be led by a common clergy or at least one overall common leader. Starting early in the second century in some places and almost universally by the third century, the bishop was the head cleric over all the individual assemblies within the city. By the third century, the idea of “church” in such a setting clearly referred to the sum total of the multiple assemblies and the common clergy that served them, all organized under the city’s one bishop. This was the church of this or that city or region. Therefore, there was nothing in the phrase “the church of Corinth” that would imply a singular building to an ancient or to anyone of Luther’s day.

The second point to be made concerns the titles for the clergy who served the church organized in this manner during Luther’s time. A derivative result of the

⁶ The historical development of the episcopate from the early church of Jerusalem to the Council of Nicaea and beyond has long been a matter of theological and academic discussion. See, for example, Jerome, referred to by Luther on this topic in SA II IV 9. For a classic yet still valuable scholarly overview, see Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100–325*, vol. 2 of *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1883), 2132–154. { For a fairly recent treatment of what is still much the same material, see Francis A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Newman Press, 2001).

development outlined above is that the word *bishop* had a strong geographic component. The bishop was tied to a place, usually a city. Anything that existed within the region or city that pertained to the Christian religion—whether a holy site, a place of pilgrimage, a Christian school or university, or the erection of a new cathedral—belonged at least in part to the purview of the bishop.

Over time, the geography associated with the word *bishop* enlarged, incorporating more than a single city. The Roman Empire began using the word *diocese* to describe large administrative areas of territory. After the Christian religion attained legal standing and became the official religion of the empire, Christian leaders often took up ecclesiastical responsibilities for areas that tended to correspond to the geographic administrative areas of the empire. As the state weakened over time and became ineffective or even nonexistent, the transition of the term *diocese* to an ecclesiastical use was easy if not obvious. Through this process, the region associated with the oversight of the bishop came to be called the “diocese” or “episcopal see.”

In Germany, even before the Reformation began, the church was similarly organized into local regions that individually were called a parish (*Pfarre, Pharre*).⁷ Just as within the city of the bishop, within the parish, there could be and often were multiple

⁷ Luther commented that he believed there were about 1,800 parishes in Saxony. See *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530), vol. 46, pp. 231–234, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

ecclesiastical entities, assemblies, or buildings. In the Wittenberg parish, there was the city church (*Stadtkirche*), the castle church (*Schloßkirche*), the university, and the Augustinian monastery where various preaching, teaching, and worship activities occurred. Preaching and teaching also occurred in the surrounding farming villages, which belonged to the parish.

The head clergyman over such a parish was called the *Pfarrherr* (often *pastor* in Latin). He was the equivalent in Luther's day to the city bishop in the ancient church. He was the ecclesiastical overseer of the church in his city and surrounding area. This included all related institutions insofar as they involved ecclesiastical activities, as well as the city schools and their teachers insofar as they gave religious instruction to the children.⁸

Additionally, in larger parishes, there would be various clergy under the *Pfarrherr* who assisted in the parish work.⁹ Wittenberg was typical in this regard in that during

⁸ In an analogous way, C. F. W. Walther and the Missouri Synod followed this example as they encouraged the establishment of Lutheran schools in America and were very clear that such schools fell under the oversight of the pastor insofar as the religious instruction was concerned. For one example of an article that applied this idea to the church and school in the Missouri Synod, see C.A.T. Selle, "Das Amt des Pastors als Schulaufseher," *Evang.-Luth. Schulblatt* 4 (1869): 129–154, which was written with assistance from Walther.

⁹ Luther mentions offices such as *Küster* (sacristan—one who cares for the church and property), *Prediger* (one focused specifically on preaching and teaching), as well as the *Diakon* (deacon) or *Kaplan* (chaplain). Cf. *A Sermon on Keeping Children in School* (1530), AE 46:220–221.

Luther's time, the parish typically had three assistant ministers who held the title *Diakon* (deacon).¹⁰

Alongside these titles and organizational facts of the Wittenberg parish, one should consider the explicit statements of the reformers themselves in terms of how they considered grades of offices in the church. They did not consider these grades or divisions (or those of the ancient church) to be of divine origin, nor did they think it was necessary for them to be the same in all places. Instead, they taught that everyone who has a call to preach and administer the sacraments has the same basic office even if one is made *Pfarrherr* or bishop over the others for the sake of order.¹¹

The question for the translator is how to handle such terms that are unfamiliar to the English reader. The general terms of our day, “pastor” or “preacher,” allow no precision

¹⁰ Hans Volz, *Die Lutherpredigten des Johannes Mathesius: Kritische Untersuchungen zur Geschichtsschreibung im Zeitalter der Reformation*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 12 (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger Eger & Sievers, 1930), 174.

¹¹ For example, “It is our greatest wish to maintain church-polity and the grades in the church even though they have been made by human authority” (Ap XIV [VIII] 1 [24], W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921], 315). A good explicit treatment of the office of preaching and those helping offices that are created from it can be found in *Lehre und Wehre* 20 (1874): 257–268, 331–339, 363–369. This article has been translated and published: E. W. Kähler, “Does a Congregation Ordinarily Have the Right Temporarily to Commit an Essential Part of the Holy Preaching Office to a Layman?,” trans. Mark D. Nispel, *Logia* 6, no. 3 (1997): 37–46.

in terms of the grades of office that are part of this context. One can attempt to make use of “head pastor” (for *Pfarrherr*) and “assistant pastor” (for *Kaplan, Diakon, etc.*), and I have done so in the past. But “head pastor” does not carry the same geographic sense as *Pfarrherr*. The problem of vocabulary is acute enough that I decided to take the approach of using English terms that have one-to-one correspondence with their German counterparts, even if they are not in common use and must be accompanied by definition and explanation.

So, for *Pfarrherr*, I have decided to make use of the unfortunate term *parish rector*. It is unfortunate in that it is not a contemporary English term for any common church office.¹² Nevertheless, it is not completely without precedent.¹³ One must risk a bit of tedium for the sake of clarity.

Kirchendiener is a very general, broad, and abstract term often used to refer to all the offices and workers in the church together. I have used “church worker” or “one who serves in the church” here, as it includes both those traditionally ordained and those who are not.

Diakon is a title for a concrete office. The *Diakon* was an ordained preacher who administered the sacraments and was an assistant to the parish rector. This word does not occur in the Wittenberg letter. However, it does appear in the introduction and in a

¹² A “rector” in English is generally associated with an academic institution, not a parish.

¹³ See Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Theology and Practice of “the Divine Call”* (St Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2003), 13, where “*Pfarrherr*” is translated “rector.”

footnote. I have used “assisting deacon” for this term. In Wittenberg, there were three regular ministers with the title *Diakon*.¹⁴

The *Kaplan* was also an assistant to the parish rector and generally engaged in teaching and administering the sacraments.¹⁵ It was a common title used in many different

¹⁴ Georg Rörer, for example, was ordained as *Diakonus* of the Wittenberg parish (Luther, *Formula for Ordination* [1535], vol. 38, p. 403, in *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 65 vols. [Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993], hereafter WA).

¹⁵ As an example, from January 28, 1546, until his death a few weeks later, Luther was in Eisleben to settle a dispute between the ruling members of the Mansfeld dynasty. Count Albrecht had built a new village for the miners outside of Eisleben, which caused a great controversy of the patronage rights of the church in Eisleben (see Gottfried G. Krodel, introduction to Luther, *Letter to Count Albrecht of Mansfeld* [December 6, 1545], AE 50:281–283; Hans Volz and Eike Wolgast, “Zu unserer Nr. 4300 und 4301,” WA Br 12:364–365). In a document written on February 16, only two days before Luther’s death, Luther and Jonas gave their suggestion for resolution of the problems and suggested how the church in the castle of the landgraves in Mansfeld should relate to the church in the city of Mansfeld and to the church in Eisleben. In the *Schloßkirche*, or castle church, there was to be a *Kaplan* who should help the *Schloßprediger* and who should administer the sacrament and make sure that the ceremonies would be held in an orderly manner (Luther and Jonas, *Compromise Concerning the Churches and Schools in Mansfeld and Eisleben* [February 16, 1546], WA Br 12:368). Further, “the *Kaplan* should administer the sacrament, and on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday have a German reading from the sermons of Dr. Luther and receive 100 gulden yearly for support.”

places.¹⁶ In the Wittenberg opinion translated below, the title is included among the other church workers who the city council is not to appoint without the knowledge and approval of the parish rector. I have chosen to use “assistant preacher” here.

Both the *Diakon* and *Kaplan* were recognized by Luther in 1521 as “Christian bishops” along with the parish rector.¹⁷ By the elector’s command of 1535, they were to be ordained, after theological examination by the Wittenberg theological faculty, “and thus given the power and authority of their priestly and diaconal office.”¹⁸

A final comment is that the term *Visitation* that occurs here refers to the regular, ongoing inspections of the churches and schools in Saxony in regard to the state of those

¹⁶ In 1533, a student from the university was added to the Wittenberg parish staff and was given the title *Kaplan* alongside the three assistants who had the title *Diakon*. This student helped the assisting ministers care for the outlying villages by teaching and catechizing the children. He was not to administer the sacrament unless it was an emergency. The three with the title *Diakon* were permitted to administer the sacrament, although the villagers in general were to attend the city church to receive the sacrament. See the letter of Elector John Frederick to Luther (May 22, 1545), WA Br 11:104–105.

¹⁷ “For this reason we recognize and assert on behalf of God the Holy Spirit that Christian bishops are honorable, married, mature, good men, learned in the word of truth, many in a single city, who are chosen by the neighboring bishops or by their own people. They might be the very ones whom we now call parish priests, and their chaplains and deacons” (Luther, *Misuse of the Mass* [1521/1522], AE 36:158).

¹⁸ Quoted in Paul Drews, introduction to Luther, *Das Ordinationsformular*, WA 38:407.

institutions. This was a system of oversight instituted by the elector over the church in his territory during the 1520s.¹⁹

I. Introduction provided by the Weimar Edition editor, Otto Clemen²⁰

At the beginning of 1536, conflict broke out again in Zwickau between the city council and the parish rector in regard to the calling of those who minister in church and school. The parish rector, Leonard Beyer, claimed the right to choose assistant preachers and assisting deacons on account of the order of visitation, or at least so he said. He claimed the right “to present and send them to Wittenberg and to ordain and anoint such people.” The council stated to the contrary that “the [right of] election remained with it and not with the parish rector and that he just wanted to retain the old lordship [of the papal clerics] over them.” After they had chosen [the candidates], the council wanted to present the chosen to the rector, who then for his part could take care of the corresponding notification of Wittenberg. With a heavy heart, Beyer submitted. He requested that the council “for the sake of peace and unity agree that no one would be forced (into office), and that no one would be presented and assigned without his will and foreknowledge.” The council promised to abide by this wish of the pastor. Soon thereafter, controversy broke out

¹⁹ See Melanchthon and Luther, *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony* (1528), AE 40:263–320; Emil Sehling, ed., *Die Evangelischen Kirchenordnungen Des XVI. Jahrhunderts* (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1902), 1:242–299.

²⁰ WA Br 7:476–477. In this translation, I have omitted various references Clemen gave to his external sources. I have also omitted a section in the middle of the introduction that provides more background as to how the controversy played out in Zwickau but does not bring any further insight to the doctrinal and linguistic matters of interest here.

again. Beyer began it with gibes made from the pulpit. When the council protested to him about this, he appeared one day in a council meeting to complain about the actions of the council in the calling of “those who serve in the school.” Already earlier, the council had overstepped its authority in that it had accepted [into office] the “schoolmaster” (that is, Peter Plateanus, who on May 5, 1535, was assigned as [school] rector of the gymnasium²¹) without his, the parish rector’s, foreknowledge and will; and more recently once again, in the selection of a new teacher (that is, Nicolas Rudolf²²) into the office of Jerome Nopus. “Infringement [by the council] on his office, in which the Holy Spirit has set him, has occurred.” On account of this, he felt compelled to call for a decision of the Wittenberg leaders. . . .

From letters by Liborius Magdeburg to Stephan Roth, we know that Beyer himself went and obtained the judgment [*iudicium*]t in Wittenberg.²³ He arrived there on July 20. Spalatin was in Wittenberg from July 16 to July 22, and obviously also still on July 24. It is interesting that Melanchthon added an absentee opinion: “And to me, Philip Melanchthon, it appears to be right, just, and useful, that the calling of assisting deacons and of those

²¹ That is, a secondary school.

²² See Otto Clemen, introduction to Luther’s letter to Anton Rudolf (May 12, 1536), WA Br 7:408.

²³ That is, he went to Wittenberg and helped direct the discussions regarding his complaints. The Zwickau council, when presented with the Wittenberg judgment, complained that they were not given equal opportunity to be heard in Wittenberg.

who teach in the school should be jointly in possession of the council and the pastor of the church.”²⁴

II. Letter Communicating Wittenberg’s Formal Opinion to the City Council of Zwickau²⁵

Our gospel and doctrine emphasize most importantly that one should distinguish well between the two kingdoms, the worldly and the spiritual, and not intermingle them, as long as an emergency or lack of people do not compel us to do so. That is, wherever there are people who govern the town hall²⁶ and the city, and again, where there are people who look after the parish office²⁷ and the churches, one should not interfere in any part of the office of the other. Rather, let each receive his own (office) commended to his conscience, as St. Peter teaches that we should not be *ἀλλοτριεπίσκοποι* [1 Pet 4:15].²⁸ From the beginning, these two offices were segregated by Christ. And experience all too often shows that there can be no peace where the town council or the city want to rule the parish or, vice versa, where the parish rector wants to rule the government or the city, as the example of the papacy showed us all too well.

²⁴ *Et mihi, Philippo Melanthoni, rectum, iustum et utile videtur, ut vocatio diaconorum et eorum, qui docent in schola, sit communiter penes senatum et pastorem Ecclesiae* (WA Br 7:477).

²⁵ WA Br 7:477–478.

²⁶ *Rathaus*.

²⁷ *Pfarramt . . . versorgen*.

²⁸ Luther translated this word as a phrase: *der in ein frembd Ampt greiffet*, “he who reaches into another’s office” or “an office not belonging to him” (WA DB 7:310–311).

Accordingly, we beseech and admonish you, Parish Rector and Teacher Leonard, good friend, that in this matter, you in Zwickau should hold fast to the decisions of the visitation articles²⁹ and of the later electoral recess.³⁰ For the devil does not take a vacation. Flesh and blood are not good. And the people of this dangerous age are strange and facetious, many of whom seek not what is required for peace and unity but rather what their desire and curiosity demand.

Accordingly, no peace or unity can remain wherever the assistant preacher,³¹ the schoolmaster, and others who serve in the church,³² etc., know that they are able to be in the office of the church without the knowledge and will of the parish rector,³³ realizing that

²⁹ The Weimar edition editor (Otto Clemen) points out that the Ruling of the Visitors for Zwickau from January 30, 1529, states “that the (city) council from now on should take on preachers with the knowledge and counsel of the pastor” (WA Br 7:478n2, referring to Sehling, ed., *Kirchenordnungen* 1.1:722).

³⁰ In this context, a recess is a decree of an electoral or imperial diet, or assembly. This electoral recess is discussed by Otto Clemen, introduction to Luther’s letter to Joh. Göbel et al. (August 18, 1531), WA Br 6:161. On August 3, 1531, Elector John decreed that neither the city council of Zwickau nor any other calling body (*Kollator*) would be permitted to take on or dismiss a preacher without previously notifying the elector and having this approved.

³¹ *Kaplan* (chaplain or assistant preacher). See my introductory comments.

³² *Kirchendiener*.

³³ *wo der Kaplan, Schulmeister, Kirchendiener wissen, daß sie ohn Wissen und Willen des Pfarrherrns mügen im Kirchenampt sein.*

on this basis, they can appeal to the city council and be defiant, since [in a controversy,] one can always find supporters against parish rectors. Thus, if they³⁴ should intentionally accept or sanction an assistant preacher, a schoolmaster, or church worker³⁵ without [the parish rector's] knowledge or consent, you should not concede or grant that precedent. Just as we here in Wittenberg, in accordance with the Visitation, indeed even allow the parish rector to take on or dismiss [such people] without the knowledge and counsel of the secular government. And as far as we know, this is how all the other cities proceed, except where the visitors³⁶ are entreated for this purpose (where otherwise none can be obtained).

The secular government has enough of its own to do. It should not interfere. It is not to burden itself with unnecessary duties of ruling. It also has a vexing authority. Neither Zwickau nor any other city should be ashamed to follow the example of Wittenberg and other cities, because it is in accordance with the order of the Visitation. To diverge from such common order does not create a good mind-set but rather, in the end, causes division and devastation of the churches. We should thank God that our churches have been brought and constituted into a somewhat similar order. And God will give no good fortune to them who break such order and unity on account of their own ambition and conceit without any need to do so. God help and strengthen us all in right faith and unfeigned love. Amen.

Monday after the Day of Saint Mary Magdalene in the year 1536.

Martin Luther, doctor
Johannes Bugenhagen Pomeranus, doctor

³⁴ I.e., the city council.

³⁵ *Kirchendiener*.

³⁶ I.e., not the city council.

