

THE END OF THE PUBLIC OFFICE OF MINISTRY IN THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

Timothy Wengert

The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia

There are certain neuralgic points in the history of Christianity so deeply embedded within their own time and place that later generations, burdened with their own idiosyncratic problems, find it next to impossible to decipher them. Such is the case with the office of ministry in the Reformation and, specifically, in The Book of Concord. The less we demand that these documents answer “our questions” and allow them to speak in their own context, the more likely we will hear what they have to say to us.

The Public Office of Ministry at the End of the World

In a rather grim scene from the television drama, “A Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy,” a variety of space aliens gather in a cafe at the edge of the universe to watch its final collapse. As their native galaxies slowly get snuffed out, the creatures drink their beverages and look on helplessly. The reformers’ view of the public office of ministry also derives from their conviction that they are living at the end of this age. However, rather than slip into a cynical, existentialist ennui, they express undying hope. For this office in fact announces the beginning of new life in Christ. This “eschatological” perspective, which undergirds their entire theology, greatly clarifies their understanding of the public ministry.

In the Augsburg Confession (CA), justification by faith alone (CA IV and XX) itself bears this eschatological edge. Declaring forgiveness of sin ushers the hearer into the End times and pronounces ahead of time God’s judgment: “Not guilty because of Christ.”¹ Moreover, this promised righteousness comes to us only through the hearing of faith—not by sight or works. Thus, in the German version of CA IV, Melanchthon links Christ’s suffering for us to forgiveness, righteousness and, most significantly, eternal life.

This future-looking faith, which clings to God’s promise alone, demands a public office of ministry, designated by Melanchthon in CA V as the Predigtamt.² The *raison d’être* for this office is the justifying Word of God itself—the visible and audible promise used by the Holy Spirit to create faith in the God who in Christ promises to act for us.³ The eschatological nature of this office also becomes clear in the (for Melanchthon) uncharacteristic language of the Holy Spirit producing faith “where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel.” This total reliance on God’s action—hallmark of an eschatological perspective—contrasts to the views of the reformers’ opponents, who were not looking to God’s future but were stuck in their own self-made past, trusting in their own “preparation, thoughts, and works.”⁴

This End times perspective helps explain the small amount of space devoted in the CA (or The Book of Concord as a whole) to ordering the office of ministry. Structure is important for the sake of order, but the gospel and God’s work do not finally depend on how we order things.

Similarly, Martin Luther construes the eschatological heart of the Lord's Prayer in the Small Catechism by repeating that God's name is hallowed, God's kingdom comes, and God's will is done in themselves and by God.⁵

Reformation eschatology also explains the hefty attacks on the papacy's understanding of ministry throughout The Book of Concord. Objection to the papacy arose neither out of theological pique nor out of an abhorrence of the episcopacy or apostolic tradition but simply because in these End times the bishop of Rome had betrayed the gospel. This is why Luther's rejection of the papacy comes in part two of the Smalcald Articles, which contains "articles that pertain to the office and work of Jesus Christ."⁶ (It is also here that he lifts up the rule and equality of bishops.)⁷ Similarly, Philip Melanchthon's Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, conceived as an appendix to the Augsburg Confession, contains an eschatological flavor. The papal usurpation of political authority in Europe and its concomitant tyranny are "monstrous errors" because they "obscure faith and the reign of Christ."⁸ For Melanchthon, the characteristics of the Antichrist "clearly fit the reign of the pope" because in the End times, "he will invent doctrine that conflicts with the gospel and will arrogate to himself divine authority."⁹

In the emergency of the End times, the single most important concern for the reformers was delivering the gospel (that is, the promise of God's grace in Christ), which "is very comforting and beneficial for timid and terrified consciences."¹⁰ We maintain order in the church and organize the public office of ministry for the sake of that word of comfort, which alone can stave off the chaos of the End times for troubled hearts. Thus, the gospel and the comfort it affords demand that someone proclaim it publicly whenever Christians need it.

Sometimes, the emergency takes quite concrete forms. For Martin Luther, a midwife baptizing a baby in distress fulfills the public office of ministry as surely as if she had been ordained by Peter himself. Her own baptism made her part of the general priesthood shared by all, but the emergency forces upon her the public office.¹¹ Luther also argued that an adult, unable to find a pastor to comfort his or her conscience with the forgiveness of sins, could confess even to a child. In that emergency the child pronounces forgiveness with the authority of the public office. Like the mail, the gospel's message must get through—no matter what!¹²

The Text and Meaning of CA XIV

Only in this context can a reader understand the brevity and complexity of CA XIV, one of the most hotly contested articles among American Lutherans. The Latin version for article fourteen of the Augsburg Confession (CA) states, "Concerning church order [our churches] teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless properly called (rite vocatus)."¹³ With this, the shortest of the articles in the CA, Philip Melanchthon says everything about church order so clearly and succinctly that subsequent readers often misunderstand his intentions completely.¹⁴ The German version offers only a modicum of assistance: "Concerning church government it is taught that no one should publicly teach, preach, or administer the sacraments without a proper [public] call."¹⁵

Historical and textual analysis provides some clarity. First, although titles for the first twenty-one articles were not part of the original document (they were first added to editions published in the seventeenth century), here they match the first words in this article. These words (“concerning church government” and “concerning church order”) tell us specifically what this article addresses: how to order the public ministry of the church.

Second, the position of this article is also important. Melanchthon organized the CA (and other doctrinal statements) quite consciously. He began with the Word (CA I-VI) and moved to the Sacraments (CA IX-XIII), placing the church (the marks of which are the Word and the Sacraments) in between (CA VII-VIII). In CA XV, he explained a reference to church practices made earlier in CA VII.3. So article XIV stands on the border, so to speak, between the sacraments and church. No wonder that in the Apology (Ap XIII.11) Melanchthon suggests that ordination, properly understood as a reference to the public ministry of the Word (audible and visible), could be understood as a sacrament!¹⁶ Thus, CA XIV stands where it does—right next to the sacraments (IX-XIII) and associated with the church (VII, VIII, XV)—because those opposed to the evangelical party at Augsburg did not link ordination to the proclamation of God’s Word. Instead, they viewed it as a “sacrificial office,” where priests offered to God on behalf of the people “unbloody” sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁷ Against this distortion, CA XIV argues that the good order of the public office can never contradict the heart of the good news itself (CA IV) or the delivery of that news through the public office of ministry (CA V).

Third, the important word in CA XIV is “public.” This is the eschatological purpose of church government and order: to see to it that what has been whispered in secret is shouted from the rooftops (Matthew 10:27). In fact, the point is so important that both the official German printing of the CA in 1531 and the version printed in 1580 in *The Book of Concord* repeated the word “public” in the final phrase (shown in brackets above). This emphasis contrasted directly to self-appointed, so-called radical preachers who based their authority solely on themselves and their personal or private, “congregational” calls. Although the Roman authorities often accused Luther and the evangelicals of such usurpation of authority, in fact all the leaders of the evangelical movement were duly called pastors and preachers of the existing church. “The call,” Luther once said at table, “hurts the devil very much.”¹⁸

A fourth thing to note here is Melanchthon’s inclusion of the verb “to teach.” Philip Melanchthon himself was not a pastor or preacher. He was not ordained. Yet, the largely mythical view of him as a “lay theologian” is completely anachronistic.¹⁹ He was called as a teacher at the University of Wittenberg: first in 1518 as a member of the arts faculty and teacher of Greek, in 1519 as a lecturer on the Bible in the theological faculty and, after 1526, as a professor in both faculties. In 1524, he became the first married rector of a European university. Thus, Melanchthon’s position also fell under this article. CA XIV applies as fully to teachers of the church as to those who preach and preside in congregations.

CA XIV describes the three central offices in the churches of the Reformation: teacher, preacher and pastor. However, this does not mean that the reformers had what some have called a “functional” view of the ministry, any more than they held an “ontological” view. In fact, these

two extremes do not describe the Reformation view at all but instead express ideas more at home either in pietism or in late-medieval theology. The Reformers consistently linked the public call with certain offices—offices established by Christ, mirrored in the Old Testament, and fostered in the ancient and early medieval church. “Pastors” and bishops (the terms are interchangeable in the usage of the New Testament, the ancient church and the Reformation) find their origins in the New Testament and ancient church. “Preacher” harkens back to Peter in Acts 2 and to the Hebrew prophets—anyone who publicly bears a direct Word of God to the people. It was a distinct office in the Reformation church. Teachers find a place in the lists of Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 and in the Middle Ages became associated with the four great Latin fathers: Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory the Great.²⁰ The reformers are not saying “whoever teaches, preaches and administers the sacraments is a pastor” but “whoever does such things fulfills the very public office authorized by Christ and demanded by the Word.”

In short, wherever the church “goes public” with the gospel, there one finds the public office of ministry. Those who exercise such offices do so not because the “laity” or the “priesthood of all believers” (a concept not found in The Book of Concord) bestows authority on the office but because Christ vests the office with his authority. This explains why CA V (German) defines the “office of preaching” long before raising the question of church order. In fact, how a person enters the office is far less important than the fact that the office publicly bears the Word and the Sacraments to the world under direct authority from Christ.

Structuring the Office of Ministry in the Lutheran Confessions

There are a limited number of hints in the Lutheran Confessions about how the Reformers structured the public office of ministry. Later sources demonstrate that even in CA XIV Melanchthon was thinking about the responsibility of oversight in the form of bishops and superintendents. In 1540, Melanchthon produced an expanded version of the CA, known as the Variata. A generation later, this version came under suspicion because of the way some used it to defend a less-than-Lutheran view of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. However, many later Lutheran theologians, including Martin Chemnitz and David Chytraeus (two authors of the Formula of Concord), rightly viewed the rest of the document as an expansion and clarification of the original.²¹ In CA XIV (Var.), Melanchthon adds a single sentence to show that he assumed bishops would regulate the public office of ministry. To the phrase *rite vocatus*, Melanchthon added, “As also Paul commanded Titus [1:5] that he should set up elders [presbyters] in the towns.”²² A few years later, he used this very instruction of Paul to Titus in the ordination certificate for one of the first evangelical bishops in order to indicate that the bishop alone was to perform all ordinations within his diocese.²³

However, not only the Variata but also a document much more contemporaneous with the original CA indicates the role bishops were to play in ordering church life. The Apology, published in 1531, also dealt with the role of bishops. The opponents to the evangelical party at Augsburg had accepted CA XIV in their Confutation, but with the caveat that “canonical ordination” be used. This, of course, undermined the intent of CA XIV by attempting to force evangelicals to obey bishops opposed to the gospel.²⁴ Yet, Melanchthon used the Apology at this

point not to reject the office of bishop but rather to attack its abuse. The subtlety of his argument is sometimes lost on later readers.

He reminded the audience of the consistent position of the Saxon party and their allies at Augsburg.²⁵ Repeatedly—in private negotiations, in the CA and other public documents, and in a variety of committees set up in August 1530 to deal with the looming split—they had made their position clear. “Give us freedom to preach, teach, and practice the gospel, and we will honor episcopal authority in the church.” While Melanchthon reiterated that position here, he also made it clear that episcopal authority was not part of the gospel and the authority bestowed by Christ on the public office. It was rather an arrangement “established by human authority.”²⁶

Finally, CA XXVIII provides a lengthy discussion of church order, which Melanchthon labeled in the German “Concerning the Power of Bishops” and, in Latin, “Concerning the Church’s Power.” The mixing of ecclesiastical and secular power, a problem that dominates the early part of this article, has thankfully disappeared from the church.²⁷ The reformers were willing to put up with people who were both bishops, in the true sense of the term, and princes—as long as they carefully separated these two realms.²⁸ Melanchthon went to great lengths in this article to define the office of bishop itself, which is equivalent to the pastoral office. “Our people teach as follows. According to the gospel the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments.”²⁹ He supported this with a reference to John 20:21-23. Further on in the article, he reiterated this position but added several other duties. “Consequently, according to divine right it is the office of the bishop to preach the gospel, to forgive sin, to judge doctrine and reject doctrine that is contrary to the gospel, to exclude from the Christian community the ungodly whose ungodly life is manifest—not with human power but with God’s Word alone.”³⁰ He insisted that, in line with Luke 10:16, parishioners and teachers owe obedience to such bishops, as long as what they teach accords with the gospel. As far as matters that fall outside the gospel—whether it is jurisdiction over marriage (par. 29) or church practices (par. 30)—everything depends on the gospel. “Bishops do not have the power to institute or establish something contrary to the gospel.”³¹ Human regulations simply serve the good order of the church, but they do not bring persons closer to God and the gospel. “For the chief article of the gospel must be maintained, that we obtain the grace of God through faith in Christ without our merit and do not earn it through service of God instituted by human beings.”³²

Other documents in The Book of Concord say much the same thing but also discuss ordination as a peculiar right of bishops. Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles that “if the bishops wanted to be true bishops and to attend to the church and the gospel, then a person might—for the sake of love and unity but not out of necessity—give them leave to ordain and confirm us and our preachers.”³³ In the Treatise, Melanchthon referred back to the discussion in the CA and its Apology and provided a brief discussion of ordination—a right granted by human authority to bishops and abrogated only “when the regular bishops become enemies of the gospel or are unwilling to ordain.”³⁴ As with the right of midwives to baptize, only the eschatological urgency of proclaiming the gospel in the face of heresy or true tyranny would ever give Christians leave to ordain without permission from the one entrusted with oversight.³⁵

The Public Office of Ministry in the ELCA

It is the office of bishops and other leaders in the ELCA to determine how the witness of Scripture and the Confessions applies to the problems the church faces. Here are a few suggestions for beginning such a discussion. Consider Philip Melanchthon's call as teacher and *mutatis mutandis*, that of other teachers in ELCA seminaries—"lay" or ordained. Current concern over "lay" licensure has never touched upon whether laypersons should teach at ELCA seminaries. Our seminaries seek to provide the best teachers for future leaders in the church, who in thought, word, and deed show commitment to parish ministry. Questions about "lay" or "ordained" arise only secondarily and only in relation to the actual experience and commitments of individual teachers.

The question of "laypersons" presiding at Holy Communion—itsself an importation of medieval terminology into evangelical theology—might be resolved if the ordination and call of such persons were held not by the individual ordained (as if they ever are!) but by the synod council and bishop. Then they would be clearly set apart for the public office of ministry but not in such a way as to confuse their limited abilities and call with those of other ministers.

Far more important is the actual relation between the office (however we may fill it) and the gospel. A church that ordains or otherwise sets people apart who preach works righteousness and undermine trust in God is guilty of the same contempt for the gospel for which the Reformers criticized their opponents. Thus, pious-sounding preachers enraptured by one kind of social or personal action or another may be guilty of such deception. Ritually sensitive sacerdotes addicted either to growing mega-churches or to repristinating the liturgical past may slip into similar traps. Bishops, pastors, and teachers of the church hold offices of oversight in the church to see that such things do not happen and to preserve the eschatological edge of God's consoling gospel in Christ.

Endnotes

1. CA IV.1-3, trans. by Eric Gritsch, in: *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 38-41 [henceforth: *BC 2000*, 38-41].
2. "The office of preaching" (CA V.1 [German] in: *BC 2000*, 40). This word embraces preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments, as the modifying phrase ("giving the gospel and the sacraments") indicates. An earlier edition of *The Book of Concord*, ed. by Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 31, renders a footnote from the critical edition of the Lutheran confessions incorrectly and leaves the impression that this article did not have to do with the public office of ministry but with the "priesthood of article has to do with the public office and not with clericalism or "laicism." In the Latin version, the word "ministry" also means the public office of ministry, unlike some more general uses of the term today.
3. CA V.1-3 in: *BC 2000*, 40-41.
4. The mention of the Anabaptists in CA V is actually secondary to the real opponent ("and others"), namely such late-medieval scholastic theologians as Gabriel Biel, who argued that the justified merited God's grace by exercising natural human powers, and Erasmus of Rotterdam, who opposed Luther and Melanchthon in a debate over the freedom of the will. Luther also connected contempt for the means of grace, justification, and ministry in the Smalcald Articles, trans. by William Russell, III.8.3-13 [henceforth SA III.8.3-13], in *BC 2000*, 322-23.

5. The Small Catechism, the Lord's Prayer, 4, 7, & 10, trans. by Timothy J. Wengert, in: *BC 2000*, 356-57.
6. SA, II, in: *BC 2000*, 300. See especially SA III.4.3-4, 10 in: *BC 2000*, 307, 309. The citation of Revelation 10:3 and the use of the term "Endchrist" [End times Antichrist] here is no accident.
7. SA II.4.9.
8. Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 37, trans. by Jane Strohl [henceforth TPPP 37], in: *BC 2000*, 336.
9. TPPP 39, in: *BC 2000*, 337.
10. CA (German) XX.15, in: *BC 2000*, 54. The Latin version (CA XX.17 in *BC 2000*, 55) is even stronger: "This whole teaching [about justification by faith alone] must be referred to that struggle of the terrified conscience, and it cannot be understood apart from that struggle."
11. Martin Luther, *Concerning the Ministry* (1523), translated by Conrad Bergendoff, in: LW 40:25. Often people have misconstrued Luther's remarks as deriving the authority of the office from the baptized or the priesthood of all believers (*das allgemeine Priestertum*). In fact, throughout his life Luther held that the authority of the public office comes from Christ to the apostles and their successors (pastors and bishops). Thus, he is not arguing simply "everyone is baptized, so anyone can do this" but rather that the emergency authorizes any baptized Christian to fulfill this public office. Thus, Luther did not imagine that sex or age was ever a barrier to fulfilling this public office of ministry in an emergency.
12. For a fuller use of this metaphor, see Gerhard O. Forde, "The Ordained Ministry," in: *Called and Ordained: Lutheran Perspectives on the Office of the Ministry*, edited by Todd Nichol and Marc Kolden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 117-136, especially 133. The reference to a child forgiving sin comes from WA 49:312.
13. CA XIV, in: *BC 2000*, 47.
14. One interesting example of this misunderstanding occurred when George Lindbeck, a systematic theologian, analyzed this article at the celebration of the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession in Augsburg, Germany. The subsequent public discussion included a host of prominent church historians who objected to his construal of the article. See George Lindbeck, "Rite vocatus: Der theologische Hintergrund zu CA 14," in: *Confessio Augustana und Confutatio: Der Augsburger Reichstag 1530 und die Einheit der Kirche*, edited by Erwin Iserloh (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1980), 454-72. A similar impasse occurred when Michael Root, a systematician, and Gerhard Forde, a church historian turned systematician, debated CA VII at a convocation of teaching theologians. See Gerhard O. Forde, "Satis est? What Do We Do When Other Churches Don't Agree," and "'Satis Est': What Do We Do When Other Churches Don't Agree?", unpublished papers delivered at the 1990 Convocation for Teaching Theologians, meeting in Techny, Illinois.
15. CA XIV (German) in *BC 2000*, 46.
16. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, art. XIII, par. 11, trans. by Charles Arand [henceforth: Ap XIII. 11] in *BC 2000*, 220.
17. Ap XIII.7 in: *BC 2000*, 220. The chief function of most priests in the late Middle Ages was to recite private masses on behalf of the dead.
18. WATR 1:34 (No. 90), recorded by Veit Dietrich in November 1531.
19. This was one of the mistakes for which the church historians most faulted Lindbeck's analysis.

20. For example, the pulpit in the Foundation Church in Tübingen, built in the late fifteenth century, had the likenesses of these four encasing the pulpit, something Philip Melanchthon would have seen regularly in his days there as a student.
21. Robert Kolb, "Philipp Melanchthon: Reformer and Theologian," *Concordia Journal* 23 (1997): 309-16, especially 313.
22. Cf. Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Historical Introduction, Appendixes and Indexes to the Book of Concord; or, the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia, 1883), 110.
23. Timothy J. Wengert, "Certificate of Ordination (1545) for George von Anhalt, Coadjutor Bishop of Merseburg," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 229-33. The document was signed by Martin Luther, who presided at the consecration.
24. Ap XIV.1 in: *BC 2000*, 222-23.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid. See also his comments appended to his signature in the Smalcald Articles (*BC 2000*, 326).
27. The only remaining exception is the Vatican itself.
28. This accident of medieval European history had to do with grants of large tracts of land by secular princes (especially the Holy Roman Emperor) to bishops, archbishops, and abbots. See CA XXVIII.12 (German) in *BC 2000*, 92: "That is why one should not mix or confuse the two authorities, the spiritual and the secular."
29. CA XXVIII.5 (German), in: *BC 2000*, 92.
30. CA XXVIII.21 (German), in *BC 2000*, 94. The addition of the final phrase indicates that the authority of the office does not derive from election by the princely patron in the sixteenth century or by the synod assembly (for bishops) or the congregation (for pastors) in the twenty-first.
31. CA XXVIII.34 (German), in: *BC 2000*, 96. The examples Melanchthon furnished included requiring certain actions to obtain grace, naming as sin matters of adiaphora (already dealt with in CA XV), and, in short, "ensnar[ing] consciences" (par. 42). He had defined the gospel especially in CA I-VI, XX.
32. CA XXVIII.52 (German), in: *BC 2000*, 98.
33. SA III.10.1, in *BC 2000*, 323-24.
34. TPPP 66, in *BC 2000*, 340.
35. Throughout the Treatise (especially 61, 63, 65), Melanchthon refers to *pastores*, which the German translation rendered *Pfarrherren*. This word in the sixteenth century did not designate all of the ordained but rather that one person who was the head pastor in a church or town. Thus, in Wittenberg the only Pfarrer was Johannes Bugenhagen. Later, ordination certificates were prepared by the University faculty or the local consistory and performed by bishops or superintendents. (After the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, it became nearly impossible for the evangelicals in the Holy Roman Empire to have bishops. However, several bishops signed the preface to *The Book of Concord* in 1580 [*BC 2000*, 15].) See the definition of Pfarrer in Grimms' *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, 13: 1621.