

**The Ministry of the Bishop**  
**Theses from a Lutheran Perspective**

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1. The Lutheran Reformation insisted that in the one Church of Jesus Christ there is and must be a “Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments” which is “instituted” by God (CA 5; cf. CA 7). Everybody who obtains this ministry must be “regularly called” (*rite vocatus*, CA 14).
2. The Reformers marked a difference between essential elements of the Church and “human traditions” (*traditiones humanae*, CA 7). With respect to the essential elements, there must be “unity” in the Church. With respect to the human traditions, there can be diversity among different regional churches which does not touch or eliminate the full unity. As to the ministry, it has to be explored which aspects of it belong to the essential elements and which to the contingent (and therefore variable) human traditions.
3. The Reformers were convinced that the Church does not consist in isolated, independent parish congregations, but that there rather is and must be a *trans-congregational responsibility*. This becomes evident, e.g.,
  - a) in the search of *consensus* (lat. *consensus / magnus consensus*; cf. CA 7, CA 1) with respect to a common understanding of the Gospel and the sacraments as being the necessary and sufficient condition for the communion and unity of the church;
  - b) in the “*visitations*” as a form of trans-congregational counseling and support for the congregations and their order and common life;
  - c) in maintaining the practice of *ordaining* the ministers by other ministers who, by doing that, obtain the function of trans-congregational representation.
4. Thus, the Reformers retained the idea and practice of “*episkopé*” which implies trans-congregational responsibility being an indispensable function of the church. This function is not exclusively held by

the ordained ministry (in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, e.g., also by the regional state authorities; nowadays, particularly by the synods). But it belongs constitutively to the tasks of the ordained ministry.

5. The Lutheran Reformers did not decline the Bishops' ministry on principle and in general. They rather were willing to accept it because it was the ordinary and historically established form of trans-congregational episkopé. They did not want to remove but rather reform it. I.e.: They wanted to restore it to its proper form which is appropriate to the Holy Scripture.
6. The Reformers' critique of the way the Western church practiced the task of episcopacy focused on the commingling of the bishops' spiritual and secular authority (cf., particularly, CA 28). Yet, they did not demand that the bishops abstain from obtaining any secular authority. But they insisted that there must be a strict distinction between their genuine spiritual duties and their additional secular duties. In other words: It must be always made clear whether they act as spiritual authorities or as secular authorities.
7. The spiritual tasks of a bishop (according to the Lutheran Confessions) are
  - a) proclaiming the Gospel and administering the sacraments, and taking responsibility for the right doctrine of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments ("Lehrzucht");
  - b) excommunication of 'persistent sinners' ("Kirchenzucht");
  - c) ordination of ministers.
8. The Christians are requested to obey the bishops insofar as the bishops
  - rightly proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments in accordance to the Holy Scripture;
  - demand nothing which is not explicitly demanded by the Gospel – or more precisely: demand nothing to be religiously binding which is not explicitly mandated by the Gospel (this refers, e.g., to the rules of fastening or Church holidays);
  - demand nothing which contradicts the Gospel (this refers, e.g., to the *communio sub una* in the Holy Supper and, to some respect, also celibacy).

9. The Christians' obedience to the bishops, thus, is a *qualified* obedience, their authority is a *qualified* authority. The word of a bishop is not as such identical with the word of God, and the Christians have the capability and competence to operate with this distinction, i.e.: to measure the word of the bishop with reference to the word of God.
10. The Lutheran Reformers in 16<sup>th</sup> century Germany made the experience that the bishops in charge not only did not adopt the understanding of the Gospel which the Reformers had learned from their Bible studies, but rather prosecuted this understanding as being heretic. This led the Reformers to see that the institution of episcopacy as such is not suitable to warrant that the church steadily persists in the truth. Episcopacy, thus, cannot be a constitutive, essential element of the church. The (indispensable!) tasks of episkopé can also be coped with in other forms than episcopacy. From this, yet, as already said, does not follow a general rejection of episcopacy. The church *needs not but can* introduce bishops in order to fulfil its mission.
11. According to the Lutheran doctrine, the ministry of a bishop is not a discrete ministry besides (or above) the ordained ministry. It is a specific form of the ordained ministry with specific tasks of trans-congregational governance and representation. To underline this position, the Reformers referred to the tradition of the Ancient Church when the terms "presbyteros" and "episkopos" were often used synonymously. This has strong consequences:
12. *First*, the functions of episkopé can be fulfilled without acting bishops. This is important for the ordination of ministers. As already said, the Reformers insisted that in their churches ordination remained the binding form of introduction into church ministry. In Reformation time, ordinations were performed by ministers who were ordained themselves. From a Lutheran perspective, thus, there was no time when there were no "regularly called" pastors in Lutheran churches. There is no need to reflect upon an "interruption" of the "apostolic succession", because such an "interruption" does not exist (or, to put it more precisely: it only exists from the perspective of a different concept of episcopacy).
13. *Second*, the installation of a bishop does not require a second ordination. The installation of a bishop does not make a categorical difference to the installation of an already ordained pastor into a new parish congregation. Or, more exactly: The installation of a bishop *is* nothing

but the installation of an already ordained pastor into a new office, a new function.

14. This does not exclude that the act of inauguration of a bishop follows a specific agenda which is appropriate to the specific function of a bishop. E.g., the participation of officials with episcopal function from other churches of the same denomination or from other denominations can be a strong symbol for the worldwide ecumenical communion which the new bishop is part of. However, this participation must not appear to be necessary to “heal” a “deficiency” which was supposed to be caused by an alleged “interruption” of the “apostolic succession”.
15. Liturgically, in the German Lutheran churches the ordination of a minister as well as the inauguration of a bishop encloses the acts of laying on of hands and praying for the descent of the Holy Spirit, realized by one or several clerics with church-leading function (episkopé). Provided is also the participation of members of other church-leading institutions like Synods who also fulfill functions of episkopé.
16. This does not necessarily imply the concept of an apostolic succession *by means of a bishop’s laying on of hands*. *De facto*, yet, the German Lutheran churches for quite some time have taken measures to ensure that ordinations only take place *under participation of* clerics with episcopal function.
17. Most of the German Lutheran churches have limited the mandate of their bishop. Episcopacy is a function which is bestowed temporally. After the end of term, thus, the bishop ceases from being bishop, takes over a new pastoral post or retires. Because the ordination to ministry does not imply a temporal restriction of mandate, however, he or she does not cease from being minister and is entitled to fulfil the functions he or she is bestowed with by ordination.
18. In the German Lutheran churches, episkopé is not exclusively realized by the bishop, but in a differentiated network of several church-leading institutions (“kirchenleitende Organe”) who cooperate in “work-sharing communion and mutual responsibility” (“arbeitsteilige Gemeinschaft und wechselseitige Verantwortung”). As to the description of the tasks of the bishop, art. 61 [1] of the Church Constitution of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria, e.g., displays an understanding of episcopacy which intends to be as remote as possible from the idea of an authoritarian “Church ruler”. It rather imagines a

pastoral moderator and a person who initiates and inspires processes of communication in the church and between the different church groups and at the same time represents the church in the public sphere and in dialogue with state authorities and political institutions. As far as the church doctrine is concerned, the bishop is ascribed a veto right against, e.g., decisions of the Synod. But a complex system of checks and balances ensures that the bishop cannot block Synod decisions permanently and definitively when the Synod holds on to its decision (in Bavaria, this happened in the 1970 years in the conflict about the ordination of women). In general, however, the arrangements of the Church Constitution aim at achieving an as full as possible *consensus* of all church-leading institutions.