

THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMERS AND ORDINATION

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1 CHAPTER 1

2 LUTHER AND ORDINATION

3

4 The magisterial reformers made a clear break with the Roman Catholic sacramental
5 view of ordination of the clergy. The descendants of Luther and Calvin closely followed
6 the Reformers' ordination theologies and practice. In this paper we will discuss Luther and
7 Calvin's ordination theology and practice in the context of their break with the Roman
8 Catholic Church.

9

10 **Luther's ordination views as a Roman Catholic priest**

11

12 Luther's first comments about the significance of ordination were made in 1515.
13 This is 2 years before the posting of the 95 Theses and five years before his
14 excommunication. At the time he is still a faithful priest of the Catholic Church and has a
15 sacramental view of ordination.

16 In his early views Luther explains that ordination makes works of the priest
17 legitimate. He explains the significance of ordination by comparing a layman with a priest
18 in the performance of priestly functions. When a layman performs a priestly office, Luther
19 writes, "because he has not been consecrated and ordained and sanctified, he performs
20 nothing at all, but is only playing church and deceiving himself and his followers." This
21 ritual is similar to "the righteous, good, and holy works, which are performed either
22 without or before justification." However, if this layman becomes an ordained priest his
23 ministry for the salvation of believers would count.

24 Another comparison Luther makes is between a monkey and a man. "A monkey can
25 imitate the actions of people, but he is not a man on that account. But if he should become

1 a man, this doubtless would not take place by virtue of these actions, by which he has
2 imitated a man, but by some other power, namely, God's; but then having become a man,
3 he would truly and rightly perform the actions of a man.”¹

4
5

Luther's break from the sacramental view of ordination

6 After his break from Rome Luther's view of ordination changed. In his treatise, *The*
7 *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther rejected the Roman Catholic view of
8 ordination and argued that, just like ancient Israel, the Christian Church has been captured
9 by sin, error and superstition into a Babylonian exile, and now is the time to bring the
10 people of God out of this false system of worship. The German reformer saw that the
11 Church's captivity was most visible in its sacramentalization of baptism, communion and
12 ordination.

13 Commenting upon the rite of ordination Luther asserted, “of this sacrament the
14 church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the church of the pope. Not only is
15 there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about
16 it in the whole New Testament.” He then continues, “I do not hold that this rite, which has
17 been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am
18 opposed to the invention of human fictions.” Appealing to the Bible, Luther stresses, “We
19 ought to see that every article of faith of which we boast is certain, pure, and based on clear

¹ Martin Luther, “Scholia on Romans; chapter 3” (1515) in Lehman and Pelikan (eds.), *Luther's Works* 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959-1981) 25: 234, 235. From hereafter simply referred as *LW*.

1 passages of Scripture. But we are utterly unable to do that in the case of the sacrament
2 under consideration.”²

3 Luther observed that the catholic view of ordination was founded upon an
4 unbiblical distinction between clergy and laity. According to the reformer, the act of
5 ordination was designed “to set up a seed bed of implacable discord, by which clergy and
6 laymen should be separated from each other farther than heaven from earth, . . . Here,
7 indeed, are the roots of that detestable tyranny of the clergy over the laity.” It destroys the
8 fellowship among Christians: “Here Christian brotherhood has perished, here shepherds
9 have been turned into wolves, servants into tyrants, churchmen into worse than
10 worldlings.”³

11

12 **Equality of all believers and the function of priests and bishops**

13 A few years later, in 1523, in a treatise on, “Temporal Authority, To What Extent
14 Shall It Be Obeyed?” Luther pointed to the equality of all believers, and the purpose and
15 function of church leaders. Quoting Rom. 12; 10, 1 Pet. 5:5 and Luke 14:10, he stated,
16 “Among Christians there shall and can be no authority; rather all are alike subject to one
17 another Among Christians there is no superior but Christ himself, and him alone.”⁴

18 If among Christians there is this equality, what then, in Luther’s mind, is the
19 function of the priests and bishops? “The government is not a matter of authority or power,
20 but a service and an office, for they are neither higher nor better than other Christians.

² Luther, “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church” *LW* 36: 106, 107.

³ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴ Luther, “Temporal Authority; to What Extent shall it be obeyed?” in *LW* 45: 116, 117.

1 Therefore, they should impose no law or decree on others without their will and consent.”
2 In what way do they rule? Luther replies, “Their ruling is rather nothing more than the
3 inculcating of God’s word, by which they guide Christians and overcome heresy. As we
4 have said, Christians can be ruled by nothing except God’s word, for Christians must be
5 ruled in faith, not with outward works.”⁵

6

7

Biblical meaning of true ordination

8 Early in his ministry as the reformer, Luther tried to persuade the Bohemians to
9 abandon their dependence on the Roman bishops to ordain their ministers with an appeal to
10 the New Testament practice and purpose of ordination. In 1523 he wrote to the Bohemians,
11 laying down what he believed to be the proper biblical doctrine of ordination. Luther
12 contrasted papal ordination with the New Testament practice and purpose. He argued,
13 “Ordination indeed was first instituted on the authority of Scripture, and according to the
14 example and decrees of the Apostle, in order to provide the people with ministers of the
15 Word.”⁶

16 This ministry of the Word is important enough to warrant ordination. He explains,
17 “The public ministry of the Word, I hold, by which the mysteries of God are made known,
18 ought to be established by holy ordination as the highest and greatest of the functions of the
19 church, on which the whole power of the church depends, since the church is nothing
20 without the Word and everything in it exists by virtue of the Word alone.”⁷ For Luther,

⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶ Luther, “Concerning the Ministry,” LW 40: 11.

⁷ Ibid.

1 therefore, the ordination for the preaching of the Word is the highest function of the
2 church.

3 Instead of the ministry of the Word, the Catholic clergy “only ordain priestly
4 functionaries who offer up masses and hear confessions. For this is what the bishop means
5 by giving the chalice into the hands of the candidate and giving him the power of
6 consecrating, and sacrificing for the living and the dead.”⁸ “Everyone who loves Christ
7 ought to shudder before this situation and rather endure any suffering than to be ordained
8 by the papists since everything in those ordinations is done and performed in greatest
9 perverseness and impiety.”⁹

10 According to Luther, the main task of the church’s leadership is to teach God’s
11 Word. Referring to Paul’s instruction to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:2, “These things entrust to
12 faithful men who will be able to teach others,” Luther comments, “Here Paul rejects all the
13 show of tonsure and anointing and ordaining and only requires that they be able to teach,
14 and to them alone he wants to entrust the Word.”¹⁰ It is the teaching of the Word by the
15 leadership, which will accomplish what is necessary for the church. He explains, “If the
16 office of teaching be entrusted to anyone, then everything accomplished by the Word in the
17 church is entrusted, that is, the office of baptizing, consecrating, binding, loosing, praying,
18 and judging doctrine.”¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁹ Ibid, 11.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

1 people. From Luther’s description it is clear that during ordination nothing is imparted by
2 the laying on of hands, except the symbol of acceptance and recognition.¹⁴

3 Luther cautions not to put this form of election immediately into practice but let
4 individual cities adopt this practice. Then these cities will be an example for other cities to
5 be followed. However, “none should be forced to believe.” When this biblical model
6 succeeds “with the help of the Lord, and many cities adopt this method of electing their
7 bishops, then these bishops may wish to come together and elect one or more from their
8 number to be their superiors, who would serve them and hold visitations among them, as
9 Peter visited the churches, according to the account in the Book of Acts [Acts 8:14ff.;
10 9:32ff.]. The final outcome would be that “Bohemia would return again to its rightful and
11 evangelical archbishopric, which would be rich, not in large income and much authority,
12 but in many ministers and visitations of the churches.”¹⁵

13

14

Qualifications for ordination

15

Practical qualification

16 In 1527, in his “Lectures on Titus,” while maintaining the equality of the priesthood
17 Luther describes various qualifications for ordination. He explains, “Christians all have a
18 priesthood, but they do not all have the priestly function. Although all can teach and exhort,
19 nevertheless one ought to do so, and the other ought to listen, so that they do not speak at
20 the same time.”¹⁶ Paul’s instruction to Titus was that he “select ‘elders’ [in the plural] in

¹⁴ Ibid., 40.

¹⁵ Ibid., 40 , 41.

¹⁶ Luther, “Lectures on Titus” (1527) in LW 29: 16, 17.

1 each city, and they are called bishops and elders. Therefore at the time of the apostles every
2 city had numerous bishops. Then Christianity was in outstanding condition.”¹⁷ This is in
3 contrast to the policy of the Catholic Church that appoints only one bishop in each city.
4 Since that time the function of bishop was distorted and abused, and, according to Luther,
5 “All bishops nowadays are of the devil. There is no hope of salvation in any of them. They
6 sit in the seats of bishops, and no one of them is a teacher. If they do not function in the
7 office of a bishop, one cannot tell who is feeding the sheep.”¹⁸

8 However, from Paul’s instruction to Titus, it is plain that “Elders are those who
9 have authority in the Word.” This means, says Luther, “We are called bishops by apostolic
10 rite, and that is what we are. We teach Christ, and we see who believe and who live in a
11 Christian way; on the other hand, we rebuke those who do not do so, and if they refuse to
12 change, we exclude them from the fellowship of Christians and from the sacraments.”¹⁹

13 In Paul’s writings the title “bishop” is the same as an “elder.” To be chosen as an
14 elder, the person needs to have the qualifications of being “blameless,” “upright,” and
15 “holy.” Luther sees these characteristics from a practical perspective without any aspect of
16 Catholic sacramentalism. He considers every Christian to be holy. For a leader to be holy
17 means to be “zealous in holy things, so that he teaches, lives, and prays in a holy way, and
18 does other works which pertain to holiness, in his teaching and meditating.”²⁰ Luther states,

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 30.

1 “A ‘holy’ man is one who performs, speaks, sees, hears, and carries out holy things. This,
2 therefore, is the practice of holiness.”²¹

3

4 Cautions for ordination - Don’t ordain too quickly

5 In his lectures on 1 Timothy, Luther warns the church not to ordain anyone too
6 quickly. Commenting on the passage “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tim.
7 5:22,), he advises, “Trust no man easily in regard to his knowledge, learning, or piety.
8 There, too, insist on witnesses who consistently speak about his integrity and
9 circumstances.”²² It was the internal holiness of a person and a gift of God that urged the
10 church to “confirm”, “entrust” and “recognize” a person for leadership function. A hasty
11 ordination of an unfit man will bring sins into the church and it becomes responsible for
12 these sins, because that one was appointed for leadership. Luther always maintained that a
13 person should not be quickly ordained, but evaluated his Christian walk over time, then
14 find several witnesses that can confirm the integrity of the person.

15

16 Feed the church of God

17 In *An Exhortation of Martin Luther to All the Clergy Assembled at Augsburg for the*
18 *Diet of 1530*, Luther argued that the Catholic Church ordains unlearned priests who cannot
19 teach the Word of God. The bishop ordains the priest “only for the sacrifice of the mass
20 and does not ask at all about how and what one should preach and what the people need to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Luther, “Lectures on Timothy; chapter 5” (1528) in *LW* 28: 354, 355.

1 learn.”²³ Instead, as Paul brings out. “A bishop is one who shall feed God’s people.” Paul
2 instructs the bishops in Acts 20[:28] “to feed the church of God, which he obtained with his
3 own blood.” In addition, “Paul also says, ‘A bishop must be *didacticus*,’ I Timothy 3[:2],
4 Titus [1:9], that is, an apt teacher, who always perseveres in teaching.”²⁴ This means that
5 Christian bishops or elders ought to be “ordained” on the account of their knowledge of
6 Scripture and ability to teach and preach the gospel. ?

7

8 The holy garments of the candidates

9 In harmony with the teaching of the priesthood of all believers, Luther contrasts the
10 Catholic ordination with the biblical ordination of church leaders. At the ordination of
11 Aaron and his sons, they were provided with holy garments. Reasoning from type to
12 antitype, the Catholics saw the need at the Catholic ordination of priests, that these priests
13 should be dressed in special garments. Luther had no use for this, stating, that the
14 ordination of the Levitical priests was “far different from the chrism and oil of the false
15 priests and false bishops of our pope who, despite their ordination, their ornaments, and the
16 splendor in which they present themselves to the public as priests, may yet be hypocrites,
17 unholy and godless people.”²⁵

18 The real meaning of these holy garments of the Levitical priesthood for the
19 Christian Church represents the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Luther describes these as follows:
20 “Nothing else than the beautiful, divine, and various gifts of the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul

²³ Luther, “An Exhortation of Martin Luther to All the Clergy Assembled at Augsburg for the Diet of 1530” in *LW* 34: 45-47.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Luther, “Selected Psalms II; Psalm 101,” (1535) *LW* 13: 294, 295.

1 (Eph. 4:11, 12) and St. Peter (1 Peter 4:10) say, which were given to Christendom to
2 advance the knowledge and the praise of God, a function which is carried out pre-
3 eminently by the ministry of preaching the Gospel.”²⁶ Luther points to Christ as the one
4 who ordains. He continues, Christians “must be completely holy priests and possess holy
5 adornment; for He who ordains Christians as priests is a Person different from anyone
6 else.” The ordination Christ as High Priest bestows “is quite different; it is the Holy Spirit
7 who adorns them in glory and holiness and clothes them in His power and with His gifts. It
8 is He who must dwell in the people who are to be priests before God; He must dress them
9 in their holy adornment and priestly garments.” Luther contrasts the spiritual adornment
10 with the useless pageantry of the Catholic ordination service: “The ornaments and
11 ostentatious pageantry—hoods, hats, staff, and whatever else it is in which the pope’s false
12 faces love to deck themselves out—do not count here or add anything to this.”²⁷

13

14

Attack on the Roman Catholic ordination service

15 In 1533 in his exposition “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests,”
16 Luther again criticizes the Catholic view of ordination and considers it “one of the real
17 abominations opposing the dear and blessed baptism.” Commenting on the ordination
18 service, Luther mentions, that during that service the clergy are supposed to achieve a
19 higher and holier spiritual state that remains with them during the rest of their lives. He

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., *LW* 13: 294, 295.

1 says, “they boast that with their chrism and consecration they produce clerics in the holy
2 church, that is, a far, far higher and holier estate than baptism bestows.”²⁸

3 Comparing the ordination service during which a cleric “is consecrated and
4 anointed with chrism, with other baptized, ordinary Christians is like comparing the
5 morning star with a glimmering wick.” Through the ordination service priests have
6 received “as they imagine, the sign, the spiritual *mark* in the soul, which no ordinary
7 Christian is supposed to have except the consecrated priest alone.”³³ This sign is the mark
8 of “an indelible character” that stays with them throughout their life.

9 In contrast to the type of priests created by the Catholic ordination service the
10 Reformer looks to a clergy that was a product of the Bible. Luther states “Let them keep
11 their abomination and chrism; we shall see to it that we get pastors and preachers on the
12 basis of baptism and God’s word without their chrism, ordained and confirmed by our
13 election and call.”²⁹

14 Here Luther’s view of ordination of the priesthood is clearly detached from
15 sacramentalism. First, all the Christians are priests anointed by baptism and second the
16 ministers who perform Eucharist are not separated and made into a cast of clerics but they
17 are simple leaders of the people, gifted by God and recognized by people for this special
18 service.³⁰

²⁸ Luther, “The Private Mass and the Consecration of Priests” in LW 38: 185.

³³ Ibid., Through ordination the priest is said to receive an indelible character.

²⁹ Ibid.,195.

³⁰ Cf. Ibid., 209.

1 Luther defines the presence of the Christian church by the proclamation of the pure
2 gospel: “Where the gospel is rightly and purely preached, there a holy, Christian church
3 must be. And whoever doubts this may as well also doubt whether the gospel is God’s
4 word.”³¹ In the biblical context ordination is not complex, but simple. Luther explains,
5 “listen how simply St. Paul speaks about ordination in II Timothy 2 [:2]: ‘What you have
6 heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach
7 others also.’ Here there is neither chrism nor butter; it is solely the command to teach
8 God’s word. Whoever has received the command, him St. Paul regards as a pastor, bishop,
9 and pope, for everything depends on the word of God as the highest office, which Christ
10 himself regarded as his own and as the highest office.”³²

11

12 Catholic response on ordination

13 In 1536, the Catholic Church convened for a general Council in Mantova to deal
14 with Church reform. Luther translated one paragraph of its recommendations into German
15 and he commented on it. Here one can clearly see the differences between the Catholic
16 view and Luther’s view of the effect of ordination on the candidate for the priesthood.

17 The document states that during the consecration to the priesthood the candidate
18 receives “the [indelible] character and image which most actually depicts, denotes,
19 signifies, and resembles Christ.”³³ Luther’s remarks read, “Learn here, O man, that the
20 character immediately renders the priests similar to Christ and makes them images of him!

³¹ Ibid., 210, 211.

³² Ibid., 210, 211.

³³ Luther, “Preface to the Counsel of the Committee” (1538) in LW 34: 245.

1 Other Christians are perhaps images of the devil, because they do not have the priestly
2 character.”³⁴

3 Here one notices that in the Catholic view, the “ordination” *renders* the priest into
4 the character and image of Christ. Luther’s disagreement with this theology is clear from
5 the note he wrote on the margin of the published text. With his comment, Luther clearly
6 shows that he does not believe that ordination renders man “in the image and character of
7 Christ.” This, according to Luther, is a result of confession, repentance and sanctification
8 of all believers.

9 The detrimental effect of this view of ordination is that the sacramental power that
10 comes from the act of ordination is still there, which renders unnecessary the holy life of a
11 priest *after* ordination. The sad result is that this view takes away any hope of common
12 person to ever develop a character that is in the image and character of Christ. Shortly
13 before his death, Luther again strongly condemned the ordination ritual of the Roman
14 church in the light of the Bible: “The rite of ordaining mass-sacrificers, that is crucifiers of
15 Christ, is the devil’s “dis-order” [*inordinatio*]. The order [of priesthood] is not a sacrament,
16 but a ministry and a calling of the ministers of the church. I Corinthians 12[:28]. It has no
17 promise of the remission of sins.” The calling of ministers “is done legitimately by the
18 church, without tonsure, ointment, and other masks boasted of by human temerity as sacred
19 and necessary things.”³⁵

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³⁴ (Ibid., LW 34: 245)

³⁵ Luther, “Against the Thirty-two Articles of Louvain Theologians” (1545) in LW 34: 357.

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The process of biblical ordination

Luther makes it clear that it is the church that appoints church leaders. “We are the Christian Church, or a segment of it. This church has the power to engage pastors. The church selects such as are able and competent, not for their own sakes, but for the welfare of the church.”³⁶

Luther’s guidelines for the ordination service

In 1539 Luther produced a two-page guideline for the ordination of Gospel ministers. The earliest ordination among Luther’s followers took place in Wittenberg in 1525. However, it was in 1535 that the Elector John Fredrick made a request for an examination of candidates for ordination to the ministry. Luther frequently officiated at the ordinations and the order of the ordination service he wrote was soon used in Lutheran churches everywhere.³⁷

³⁶ Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of John; Chapter 3” (1537) in *LW* 22: 480.

³⁷ (LW 53:122-123???) The following account of an ordination is from Luther’s Table Talk (*WA*, TR 5, 112, No. 5376): “When Doctor Martin ordained Magister Benedict Schumann on Jubilate Sunday, April 22, 1540 [actually in 1537], he read the passage, Acts 13 [:3], which relates how hands were laid upon the two apostles, Paul and Barnabas; also Acts 20 [:29] in which Paul warns the bishops and pastors at Miletus to guard themselves against the wolves; as well as the third chapter of I Timothy [:1–7] and Titus 1 [:7–9] on how a bishop should be called and conduct himself.

“In addition he said: ‘My dear brother, you have been ordained by God to be a faithful servant of Jesus Christ in N. [Naumburg], to further his holy name by the pure teaching of the gospel, to which we call and send you by the power of God, just as God has sent us. Therefore, watch earnestly, be diligent, pray God that he may preserve you in this high calling, that you may not fall away by reason of false doctrine, heresy, sectarianism, or your own thoughts, but rather begin it in the fear of God, faithful diligence, and constant prayer and rightly accomplish it in Christ.’ This was the main content of his prayer.

1 In the earlier stages of the Reformation there was not a great need for an order of
2 ordination service, because the leaders were former priests. However, with the passing of
3 time, the need for an order of an ordination service without a sacramental meaning became
4 a necessity. Congregations needed to know who were qualified and recognized by the
5 leadership to preach and teach the Word of God. Thus the need arose for a proper order of
6 ordination service. Here follows Luther’s ordination order for ministers:

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8

*The Ordination of Ministers of the Word*³⁸

9 First. The candidates shall be examined either on the same or on the
10 preceding day. If they are worthy, the congregation after due admonition by the
11 preacher shall pray for them and for the whole ministry, namely, that God would
12 deign to send laborers into his harvest and preserve them faithful and constant in
13 sound doctrine against the gates of hell, etc.³⁹

14 Second. The ordinator and the minister or presbyters of the church shall
15 place the ordinands in the center before the ordinator and all shall kneel before the
16 altar. And the choir shall sing “*Veni sancte spiritus.*”

17 Third. After this the ordinator shall ascend the step of the predella and
18 facing the ordinands shall recite with a clear voice I Timothy 3. Thus writes St. Paul
19 in the First Epistle to Timothy in the third chapter [:1–7]: . . . Thus St. Paul
20 admonishes the elders of the congregation at Ephesus: [Acts 20:28–31 cited].

³⁸ The following translation is a revision of the translation by P. Z. Strodach in *PE* 6, 237–239, which is based on a handwritten Wittenberg agenda of 1539, *Ordinatio ministrorum verbi*, which was discovered and published by Georg Rietschel (called “R”), as it appears in *WA* 38, 423–431)

³⁹ H continues: “and against the power of the world, because the ministry of the church is most important and necessary for all churches and is given and preserved by God alone.”

1 Fourth. The ordinator addresses the ordinands in these or similar
2 words:⁴⁰ Herein you hear that we bishops—i.e., presbyters and pastors—are called
3 not to watch over geese or cows, but over the congregation God purchased with his
4 own blood that we should feed them with the pure Word of God and also be on
5 guard lest wolves and sects burst in among the poor sheep. This is why he calls it a
6 good work. Also in our personal conduct we should live decently and honorably
7 and rule our house, wife, children, and servants in a Christian way. Are you now
8 ready to do this? *Answer:* Yes.⁴¹

9 Fifth. Then while the whole presbytery impose their hands on the heads of
10 the ordinands, the ordinator says the Lord’s Prayer in a clear voice. Let us pray.
11 [Matt. 9:37–38 cited]. Upon this thy divine command, we pray heartily that thou
12 wouldst grant thy Holy Spirit richly to these thy servants, to us, and to all those who
13 are called to serve thy Word so that the company of us who publish the good tidings
14 may be great,⁴² and that we may stand faithful and firm against the devil, the world,
15 and the flesh, to the end that thy name may be hallowed, thy kingdom grow, and thy
16 will be done. Be also pleased at length to check and stop the detestable abomination
17 of the pope, Mohammed, and other sects which blaspheme thy name, hinder thy
18 kingdom, and oppose thy will. Graciously hear this our prayer, since thou hast so

⁴⁰ This admonition is lacking in H. F, which explicitly permits its omission, offers it in a slightly different form, beginning: “First, you hear here that the Holy Ghost called and ordained you bishops in his flock or church. Therefore, you must believe for certain that you were called by God, became the church sent you here and secular authority has called and desired you. For what the church and secular authorities do in these matters, God does through them, so that you may not be considered intruders.”

⁴¹ He omits this question and answer.

⁴² Cf. Ps. 68:11.

1 God to be pleased to protect this estate. We lay hands on the ministers and at the same time
2 pour forth prayers to God, for the sole reason that we may testify that there is a divine
3 ordinance [command].”⁴⁶

4 Luther’s view of ordination is a practical one. It comes from bottom up. The
5 candidate is elected and deposed by people. It serves the purpose of order. People choose
6 according to spiritual ability leaders to manage the church. Although Luther did not have
7 time or energy to explore other leadership offices in the church except pastor, he never
8 opposed the involvement of members in church affairs. Instead he opened the gate to it
9 with his insistence on “priesthood of all believers.”

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⁴⁶ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis; Chapter 47” (1541) in *LW* 7: 146, 147.

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CHAPTER 2

10

CALVIN AND ORDINATION

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12

Calvin's major treatment of this subject can be found in his chief work, the

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Institutes of the Christian Religion. The *Institutes* have been considered Calvin's greatest

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contribution to the Reformation. They still have considerable influence on the churches that

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are a part of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches with 214 Reformed churches in 107

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countries and a membership of over 75 million.

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The government of the church

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Calvin discusses ordination in the context of the government of the church. Based

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on Eph 4:11, Calvin sees five offices presiding over the church: Apostles, prophets,

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evangelists, pastors, and teachers. He mentions, "of these, only the two last have an

1 ordinary office in the Church. The Lord raised up the other three at the beginning of his
2 kingdom, and still occasionally raises them up when the necessity of the times requires.”⁴⁷

3

4

Pastors and teachers

5 Pastors and teachers are always needed in the government of the church. Calvin
6 writes, that “the Church never can dispense” with these offices. The difference between the
7 pastors and teachers he describes as follows: “teachers preside not over *discipline*, or the
8 administration of the sacraments, or admonitions, or exhortations, but the interpretation of
9 Scripture only, in order that pure and sound doctrine may be maintained among believers.”
10 However, “all these are embraced in the pastoral office.”⁴⁸ This means that the office of a
11 pastor involves both governing and teachings functions.

12

13

The work of a pastor

14 On the authority of Scripture, Calvin considers bishops, presbyters, and pastors as
15 the same and interchangeably gives these names to those who govern churches. Pastors are
16 responsible for “the government of a particular church” with the principle task “to preach
17 the Gospel and administer the sacraments.”⁴⁹ In explaining this pastoral office more
18 precisely Calvin says, “in presiding over the Church they have not an indolent dignity, but
19 must train the people to true piety by the doctrine of Christ, administer the sacred

⁴⁷ John Calvin, “Of the Teachers and Ministers of the Church; their Election” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, transl. by Henry Beveridge 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 319.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

1 mysteries, preserve and exercise right discipline.”⁵⁰ Here Calvin sees a connection between
2 the office of an apostle and a pastor: “what the apostles did to the whole world, every
3 pastor should do to the flock over which he is appointed.”⁵¹ Here Calvin’s vision of
4 pastoral ministry is similar to that of a “settled pastor” today who cares for his church and
5 limits his ministry to his own geographic area.

6

7

Steps to Ordination

8 Calvin is very emphatic that the pastors of the church need to have a call. He
9 stresses the need of a call for each of these officers who assume a public office in the
10 Church. To be considered, Calvin says, a “true minister of the Church, he must first be duly
11 called; and, secondly, he must answer to his calling; that is, undertake and execute the
12 office assigned to him” and he must be “faithfully performing his office.”⁵² Calvin
13 discusses the process of ordination in four points: “who are to be appointed ministers, in
14 what way, by whom, and with what rite or initiatory ceremony.”⁵³

15

16

Who is to be ordained?

17 As to *who* should be elected as church leader, Calvin mentions that that question is
18 treated in Titus 1:7 and 1 Tim. 3:1. It reveals “that none are to be chosen save those who
19 are of sound doctrine and holy lives, and not notorious for any defect which might destroy

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 322.

⁵³ Ibid., 323.

1 their authority and bring disgrace on the ministry.”⁵⁴ These qualifications are of such
2 importance that after Paul has presented “the character of a good and genuine bishop,
3 admonishes Timothy not to contaminate himself by choosing an improper person for the
4 office.”⁵⁵

5 How to be ordained?

6 Regarding the question in *what way* church leaders are to be appointed for
7 ordination, Calvin replies, that it refers “to the religious fear, which is to be observed in
8 election. Hence the fasting and prayers which Luke narrates that the faithful employed
9 when they elected presbyters (Acts 14:23).”⁵⁶ Realizing that this election was the most
10 serious in which they could engage,” they did not dare to proceed “without the greatest
11 reverence and solicitude. But above all, they were earnest in prayer, imploring from God
12 the spirit of wisdom and discernment.”⁵⁷

13

14 By whom are ministers to be chosen?

15 Calvin finds that the Bible gives sufficient evidence that bishops are chosen by
16 men. However, the Lord is also involved in the selection of leadership. This is seen in the
17 ordination of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:2, 3 when after the Holy Spirit separated the
18 candidates, there was the fasting, praying, and laying on of hands. To Calvin, the reason for
19 the laying on of hands after the Holy Spirit had spoken is “that ecclesiastical discipline

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

1 might be preserved in appointing ministers by men.”⁵⁸ The same cooperation between the
2 Lord and the God’s church was seen in the calling of Paul on the road to Damascus and the
3 subsequent involvement of Ananias in his baptism. Thus the election has “the testimony of
4 heaven and, “at the same time, the policy of the Church might not be disregarded.”⁵⁹

5 In the context of the Catholic practice of appointing priests or bishops without
6 participation of the congregation, Calvin poses the question “Whether a minister should be
7 chosen by the whole Church, or only by colleagues and elders, who have the charge of
8 discipline; or whether they may be appointed by the authority of one individual?”⁶⁰ Calvin
9 answers this question with the way Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in the churches. The
10 selection was done as follows:

11 Luke relates that Barnabas and Paul ordained elders throughout the churches, but he
12 at the same time marks the plan or mode when he says that it was done by suffrage
13 [vote]. The words are, Χειροτονησαντες πρεσβυτερους κατ' εκκλησιαν (Acts 14:23).
14 They therefore selected (creabant) two; but the whole body, as was the custom of the
15 Greeks in elections, declared by a show of hands which of the two they wished to
16 have.⁶¹

17
18 From this, Calvin concludes, “Now we see that his custom was to appoint bishops
19 by the suffrages [votes] of the people.” In addition, he refers to the Old Testament practice
20 of “electing the Levitical priests was to bring them forward in view of the people before
21 consecration.”⁶²

⁵⁸ Ibid, 324.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 325.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

1 Calvin finishes by saying, “We see, then, that ministers are legitimately called
2 according to the word of God, when those who may have seemed fit are elected on the
3 consent and approbation of the people.” He adds, “Other pastors, however, ought to preside
4 over the election, lest any error should be committed by the general body either through
5 levity, or bad passion, or tumult.”⁶³

6

7 What is the form of the ordination ceremony?

8 Calvin remarks, “It is certain, that when the apostles appointed any one to the
9 ministry, they used no other ceremony than the laying on of hands.” He thinks that this
10 form was derived “from the custom of the Jews, who, by the laying on of hands, in a
11 manner presented to God whatever they wished to be blessed and consecrated.”⁶⁴ He refers
12 to examples of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh by placing his hands upon their
13 heads (Gen. 48:14) and Jesus praying over the little children (Mt. 19:15). A similar intent
14 he sees in the act of Jews laying hands upon their sacrifices. From this he concludes,
15 “Wherefore, the apostles, by the laying on of hands, intimated that they made an offering to
16 God of him whom they admitted to the ministry.”⁶⁵

17 Calvin considers that the rite of ordination has as purpose to show to the people
18 “the dignity of the ministry” and to remind the one who is being ordained “that he is no
19 longer his own, but is bound in service to God and the Church.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 325, 326.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 326.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

1 Finally, as to the question of who is laying hands on the minister, Calvin says, “It
2 was not the whole people, but only pastors, who laid hands on ministers, though it is
3 uncertain whether or not several always laid their hands.”⁶⁷

4

5

Summary

6 From Calvin’s comments on church leaders and how they are to be ordained we
7 notice that in his views of ordination there is no sacramental view of ordination. His view
8 of ordination is strictly based on the Bible. He does have a high view of the office of the
9 pastor/bishop/elder and does not mention other leadership roles in the church besides a
10 pastor. The separation between pastor and other church members is not ontological but
11 functional for Calvin.

12 In his long treatise on ordination, Calvin does not mention women, as their
13 leadership is a completely lateral issue not contingent or connected to the theology of
14 ordination. Calvin’s theology of ordination in itself does not contain any theological force
15 stopping women from being ordained. Instead, Calvin, like Luther, prohibits women’s
16 ordination for pastoral ministry on basis of injunctions in 1 Cor 14:34-37 and 1 Timothy
17 2:11-15.⁶⁸

18

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See Calvin’s commentary on 1 Cor 14:34 in John Calvin, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians” in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 45 vols. tr. by John King, (Edinburgh: Calvin’s Translation Society, 1847-50) 39: 467-469 and John Calvin, “Commentary on 1 Timothy, Titus and Philemon” in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 45 vols. tr. by John King, (Edinburgh: Calvin’s Translation Society, 1847-50) 43: 49-53.