THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMERS AND ORDINATION

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CHAPTER 1

LUTHER AND ORDINATION

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

Luther’s ordination views as a Roman Catholic priest

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

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

Another comparison Luther makes is between a monkey and a man. “A monkey can imitate the actions of people, but he is not a man on that account. But if he should become
a man, this doubtless would not take place by virtue of these actions, by which he has
imitated a man, but by some other power, namely, God’s; but then having become a man,
he would truly and rightly perform the actions of a man.”

Luther’s break from the sacramental view of ordination

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

Commenting upon the rite of ordination Luther asserted, “of this sacrament the
church of Christ knows nothing; it is an invention of the church of the pope. Not only is
there nowhere any promise of grace attached to it, but there is not a single word said about
it in the whole New Testament.” He then continues, “I do not hold that this rite, which has
been observed for so many centuries, should be condemned; but in sacred things I am
opposed to the invention of human fictions.” Appealing to the Bible, Luther stresses, “We
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.),
simply referred as *LW*. 
passages of Scripture. But we are utterly unable to do that in the case of the sacrament under consideration.”

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

Equality of all believers and the function of priests and bishops

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

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

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3 Ibid., 112.

4 Luther, “Temporal Authority; to What Extent shall it be obeyed?” in LW 45: 116, 117.
Therefore, they should impose no law or decree on others without their will and consent.”

In what way do they rule? Luther replies, “Their ruling is rather nothing more than the inculcating of God’s word, by which they guide Christians and overcome heresy. As we have said, Christians can be ruled by nothing except God’s word, for Christians must be ruled in faith, not with outward works.”

Biblical meaning of true ordination

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

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

5 Ibid., 117.

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

7 Ibid.
therefore, the ordination for the preaching of the Word is the highest function of the church.

Instead of the ministry of the Word, the Catholic clergy “only ordain priestly functionaries who offer up masses and hear confessions. For this is what the bishop means by giving the chalice into the hands of the candidate and giving him the power of consecrating, and sacrificing for the living and the dead.”

“Everyone who loves Christ ought to shudder before this situation and rather endure any suffering than to be ordained by the papists since everything in those ordinations is done and performed in greatest perverseness and impiety.”

According to Luther, the main task of the church’s leadership is to teach God’s Word. Referring to Paul’s instruction to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:2, “These things entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others,” Luther comments, “Here Paul rejects all the show of tonsure and anointing and ordaining and only requires that they be able to teach, and to them alone he wants to entrust the Word.”

It is the teaching of the Word by the leadership, which will accomplish what is necessary for the church. He explains, “If the office of teaching be entrusted to anyone, then everything accomplished by the Word in the church is entrusted, that is, the office of baptizing, consecrating, binding, loosing, praying, and judging doctrine.”

8 Ibid., 12.
9 Ibid, 11.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
This teaching in connection with the ability to preach is foundational for the prosperity of the church. He adds, “Inasmuch as the office of preaching the gospel is the greatest of all and certainly is apostolic, it becomes the foundation for all other functions, which are built upon it, such as the offices of teachers, prophets, governing [the church], speaking with tongues, the gifts of healing and helping, as Paul directs in I Cor. 12[:28].”

Furthermore, proclaiming the gospel was the highest function of Christ’s office, instead of baptizing (John 4:20. And so it was with Paul, who stressed that his mission was not to baptize (1 Cor. 1:17).\textsuperscript{13}

Implementing the biblical model of ordination

Luther advised the Bohemians to use the following strategy to implement the biblical model of ordination. First, call upon God through personal as well as corporate prayers. Second, issue a call to the congregation and “come together freely, as many as have been touched in heart by God to think and judge as you do. Proceed in the name of the Lord to elect one or more whom you desire, and who appear to be worthy and able.” The qualifications of those elected Paul gives in 1 Titus 1 and 1 Tim 3. Third, “let those who are leaders among you lay hands upon them, and certify and commend them to the people and the church or community. In this way let them become your bishops, ministers, or pastors. Amen.” This procedure indicates that the leaders recognize the choice of the

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
people. From Luther’s description it is clear that during ordination nothing is imparted by the laying on of hands, except the symbol of acceptance and recognition.  

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

Qualifications for ordination

Practical qualification

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

14 Ibid., 40.
15 Ibid., 40, 41.
each city, and they are called bishops and elders. Therefore at the time of the apostles every
city had numerous bishops. Then Christianity was in outstanding condition.”¹⁷ This is in
contrast to the policy of the Catholic Church that appoints only one bishop in each city.
Since that time the function of bishop was distorted and abused, and, according to Luther,
“All bishops nowadays are of the devil. There is no hope of salvation in any of them. They
sit in the seats of bishops, and no one of them is a teacher. If they do not function in the
office of a bishop, one cannot tell who is feeding the sheep.”¹⁸

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

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

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Ibid., 30.
A ‘holy’ man is one who performs, speaks, sees, hears, and carries out holy things. This, therefore, is the practice of holiness.”

Cautions for ordination - Don’t ordain too quickly

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

Feed the church of God

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

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21 Ibid.

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

The holy garments of the candidates

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

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

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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.

(Eph. 4:11, 12) and St. Peter (1 Peter 4:10) say, which were given to Christendom to advance the knowledge and the praise of God, a function which is carried out pre-eminently by the ministry of preaching the Gospel.”

Luther points to Christ as the one who ordains. He continues, Christians “must be completely holy priests and possess holy adornment; for He who ordains Christians as priests is a Person different from anyone else.” The ordination Christ as High Priest bestows “is quite different; it is the Holy Spirit who adorns them in glory and holiness and clothes them in His power and with His gifts. It is He who must dwell in the people who are to be priests before God; He must dress them in their holy adornment and priestly garments.” Luther contrasts the spiritual adornment with the useless pageantry of the Catholic ordination service: “The ornaments and ostentatious pageantry—hoods, hats, staff, and whatever else it is in which the pope’s false faces love to deck themselves out—do not count here or add anything to this.”

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

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26 Ibid.

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

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

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

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


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

29 Ibid., 195.

30 Cf. Ibid., 209.
Luther defines the presence of the Christian church by the proclamation of the pure gospel: “Where the gospel is rightly and purely preached, there a holy, Christian church must be. And whoever doubts this may as well also doubt whether the gospel is God’s word.”

In the biblical context ordination is not complex, but simple. Luther explains, “listen how simply St. Paul speaks about ordination in II Timothy 2[:2]: ‘What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.’ Here there is neither chrism nor butter; it is solely the command to teach God’s word. Whoever has received the command, him St. Paul regards as a pastor, bishop, and pope, for everything depends on the word of God as the highest office, which Christ himself regarded as his own and as the highest office.”

Catholic response on ordination

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

The document states that during the consecration to the priesthood the candidate receives “the [indelible] character and image which most actually depicts, denotes, signifies, and resembles Christ.” Luther’s remarks read, “Learn here, O man, that the 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.
Other Christians are perhaps images of the devil, because they do not have the priestly character.”

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

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

34 (Ibid., LW 34: 245)

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

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.

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

The Ordination of Ministers of the Word

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

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

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

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

Fifth. Then while the whole presbytery impose their hands on the heads of
the ordinands, the ordinantor says the Lord’s Prayer in a clear voice. Let us pray.
[Matt. 9:37–38 cited]. Upon this thy divine command, we pray heartily that thou
wouldst grant thy Holy Spirit richly to these thy servants, to us, and to all those who
are called to serve thy Word so that the company of us who publish the good tidings
may be great, 42 and that we may stand faithful and firm against the devil, the world,
and the flesh, to the end that thy name may be hallowed, thy kingdom grow, and thy
will be done. Be also pleased at length to check and stop the detestable abomination
of the pope, Mohammed, and other sects which blaspheme thy name, hinder thy
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.
commanded, taught, and promised, even as we believe and trust through thy dear
Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost,
world without end. Amen.

Sixth. The ordinator shall address the ordinands with these words of St. Peter, I Peter 5 [:2–4 cited]:

Seventh. The ordinator shall bless them with the sign of the cross and use
these or other words: The Lord bless you that you may bring forth much fruit. After
this each one shall return to his own place. And if it is desired, the congregation
may sing “Now Let Us Pray to the Holy Ghost.”

This ended, the presbyter chants: Our Father, etc. And first the ordinands
shall commune with the congregation, then likewise the ordinator if he so desires.

Summary

Luther believes that rituals and ceremonies have their proper place. However, there
is nothing sacramental for Luther in his view of ordination of ministers of the Word. In the
ordination service, Luther states, “we recite the words of the divine ordinance; we call upon

43 Neither H nor F refer to the blessing. H also omits the hymn.

44 Possibly a direct entrance into the consecration of communion.

45 In comparing Luther’s order with that of the Roman church Ulrich Leopold, editor of the 53th volume of *Luther’s Works* wrote, “The rite of ordination Luther composed was an entirely new creation. It had no more than the name in common with the sacrament of ordination in the Roman church. Roman ordination was a sacrament, Lutheran ordination a rite. Roman ordination admitted a man to a special order or rank within Christendom. Lutheran ordination gave him certain functions. Roman ordination conferred on the candidate the power to conduct the sacrifice of the mass. Lutheran ordination set him aside for the work of preaching and administering the sacraments.” (LW 53: 124-126)
God to be pleased to protect this estate. We lay hands on the ministers and at the same time pour forth prayers to God, for the sole reason that we may testify that there is a divine ordinance [command]."46

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

46 Luther, “Lectures on Genesis; Chapter 47” (1541) in LW 7: 146, 147.
CHAPTER 2

CALVIN AND ORDINATION

Calvin’s major treatment of this subject can be found in his chief work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* have been considered Calvin’s greatest contribution to the Reformation. They still have considerable influence on the churches that are a part of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches with 214 Reformed churches in 107 countries and a membership of over 75 million.

**The government of the church**

Calvin discusses ordination in the context of the government of the church. Based on Eph 4:11, Calvin sees five offices presiding over the church: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. He mentions, “of these, only the two last have an
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

Pastors and teachers

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

The work of a pastor

On the authority of Scripture, Calvin considers bishops, presbyters, and pastors as
the same and interchangeably gives these names to those who govern churches. Pastors are
responsible for “the government of a particular church” with the principle task “to preach
the Gospel and administer the sacraments.”⁴⁹ In explaining this pastoral office more
precisely Calvin says, “in presiding over the Church they have not an indolent dignity, but
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
⁴⁸ Ibid., 320.
⁴⁹ Ibid.
mysteries, preserve and exercise right discipline.” 50 Here Calvin sees a connection between the office of an apostle and a pastor: “what the apostles did to the whole world, every pastor should do to the flock over which he is appointed.” 51 Here Calvin’s vision of pastoral ministry is similar to that of a “settled pastor” today who cares for his church and limits his ministry to his own geographic area.

Steps to Ordination

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

Who is to be ordained?

As to who should be elected as church leader, Calvin mentions that that question is treated in Titus 1:7 and 1 Tim. 3:1. It reveals “that none are to be chosen save those who 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.
their authority and bring disgrace on the ministry.”⁵⁴ These qualifications are of such
importance that after Paul has presented “the character of a good and genuine bishop,
admonishes Timothy not to contaminate himself by choosing an improper person for the
office.”⁵⁵

How to be ordained?

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

By whom are ministers to be chosen?

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

⁵⁴ Ibid.
⁵⁵ Ibid.
⁵⁶ Ibid.
⁵⁷ Ibid.
might be preserved in appointing ministers by men.”

The same cooperation between the Lord and the God’s church was seen in the calling of Paul on the road to Damascus and the subsequent involvement of Ananias in his baptism. Thus the election has “the testimony of heaven and, “at the same time, the policy of the Church might not be disregarded.”

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

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

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

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58 Ibid., 324.
59 Ibid., 325.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
Calvin finishes by saying, “We see, then, that ministers are legitimately called according to the word of God, when those who may have seemed fit are elected on the consent and approbation of the people.” He adds, “Other pastors, however, ought to preside over the election, lest any error should be committed by the general body either through levity, or bad passion, or tumult.\footnote{Ibid., 325, 326.}

What is the form of the ordination ceremony?

Calvin remarks, “It is certain, that when the apostles appointed any one to the ministry, they used no other ceremony than the laying on of hands.” He thinks that this form was derived “from the custom of the Jews, who, by the laying on of hands, in a manner presented to God whatever they wished to be blessed and consecrated.”\footnote{Ibid., 326.} He refers to examples of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh by placing his hands upon their heads (Gen. 48:14) and Jesus praying over the little children (Mt. 19:15). A similar intent he sees in the act of Jews laying hands upon their sacrifices. From this he concludes, “Wherefore, the apostles, by the laying on of hands, intimated that they made an offering to God of him whom they admitted to the ministry.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Calvin considers that the rite of ordination has as purpose to show to the people “the dignity of the ministry” and to remind the one who is being ordained “that he is no longer his own, but is bound in service to God and the Church.”\footnote{Ibid.}
Finally, as to the question of who is laying hands on the minister, Calvin says, “It was not the whole people, but only pastors, who laid hands on ministers, though it is uncertain whether or not several always laid their hands.”\(^{67}\)

Summary

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

In his long treatise on ordination, Calvin does not mention women, as their leadership is a completely lateral issue not contingent or connected to the theology of ordination. Calvin’s theology of ordination in itself does not contain any theological force stopping women from being ordained. Instead, Calvin, like Luther, prohibits women’s ordination for pastoral ministry on basis of injunctions in 1 Cor 14:34-37 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.\(^{68}\)

\(^{67}\) Ibid.