

**Pfarramt, Geography, and the Order of the Church:
a Formal Opinion from Wittenberg**

Translated from WA Br 7, 476-479 with reference to text of SL 10, 264-265.

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Feb 15, 2016

Introduction

This is an introduction to and translation of a letter composed on July 24, 1536 as a formal written opinion by several Wittenberg theologians regarding an ongoing controversy between the Parish Rector (Pfarrherr) and the City Council of Zwickau. The letter was sent and signed by Martin Luther, who was a faculty member of the University of Wittenberg, John Bugenhagen, who was the Parish Rector of the church in Wittenberg, and Spalatin, a long time advisor to the elector and a Visitor of the University of Wittenberg and the churches of Saxony. It was sent to Leonhard Beyer, the Parish Rector of Zwickau. It is contained in WA Br 7, 476-479 and St. L. 10, 264-265.¹

This letter is of general historical interest. But it has been and continues to be of particular theological interest today within North American Lutheranism because of one sentence it contains, which has been oft quoted in the ever on-going discussions of church and ministry. Namely, this letter contains the sentence, “no peace or unity can remain wherever the chaplain, the school master, and others who serve in the church, etc. know that they are able to be in the office of the church without the knowledge and will of the parish rector.”

This translation of the full letter, the introduction of the Weimar edition, and my own remarks serve as context in which to place that sentence.

¹ The following standard abbreviations are used to reference the following editions of Luther’s published works:

WA - *D. Martin Luthers Werke*. 120 vols. Weimar, 1883–2009

SL - *Dr. M. Luthers Sämtliche Schriften*. 25 vols. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1885-1910.

LW - *Luther’s Works*. American Edition. 55 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman. Philadelphia: Muehlenberg and Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86.

First, the Weimar edition gives a good historical introduction to this particular letter. It also provides part of an interesting and useful absentee minority opinion given by Philip Melanchthon. These are translated here for the most part. I will let them speak for themselves in regard to the events surrounding this letter.

Second are my own remarks in regard to some specifics of the translation itself. Although there remains general interest in the topic of the ministry among confessional Lutherans of North America, there is a great lack of knowledge and understanding of the historical context upon which much of the Reformation material on the ministry depends. And unfortunately this is related to an even greater lack of familiarity with the Reformation languages, German and Latin. Together these shortcomings have contributed at times to a general lack of clarity among English speaking American Lutherans regarding questions of the ministry and the use of historical material in doctrinal discussions on this topic. Without clarity of thought there can be no progress.

Since some of this background is indispensable for the context of reading this letter and the primary quote of interest, I feel the need to provide some of that background. However, for the sake of brevity I will restrain myself here to two major points. The first regards the place of geography in the concepts of the church and of the ministry among Christians of earlier centuries. The second point concerns the translation of the primary titles of office encountered in the early Lutheran materials and their relation to the previous point of geography.

The first issue is the geographic assumptions built into the language and concepts that are used to present the doctrines of church and ministry. In the New Testament Paul wrote to “the church of God residing in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 2:1). When an average North American reads this phrase he generally relates this to what he sees and experiences in his own setting

and thinks of a singular assembly defined physically for the most part by one building, or perhaps, by one parking lot. But it is very likely that the phrase is equivalent to Paul's other opening greetings where he greets the "saints" or "beloved of God" in a geographic region which is often a city² or something like "the church made up of the Thessalonians."

From all indications, in this early period of the young Christian movement it was common that Christians gathered for worship, prayer, and reading the scriptures in private homes (e.g. Acts 20:20; Rom 16:5) obviously due in part to the great cost of building and maintaining a physical structure for sizable groups to gather in. In a larger city like Corinth this by necessity implies there were many such churches or Christian assemblies within the one city. This multi-assembly situation was certainly the functioning model in the following centuries in the big cities of Rome and Alexandria where we know at least small bits about multiple-groupings of the church in those cities even up to the early third century.

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

² e.g. "all those who are beloved of God in Rome", "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with the bishops and deacons", "the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who reside in Colossai"

The second point to be made concerns the titles for the clergy who served the church that was organized in this way. A derivative result of the development outlined above is that the word “bishop” had a very strong geographic component. He was tied to a place. Anything that existed within that region or city that pertained to the Christian religion, whether a holy site, a place of pilgrimage, a Christian school or university, or the erection of a new cathedral, it all belonged at least in part to the purview of the bishop.

But over time the geography associated with “bishop” enlarged and became less and less limited to just a city. The Roman empire made use of the word “diocese” to describe large administrative areas of territory. After the Christian religion attained legal standing in the empire and became the formal official religion of the empire, Christian leaders often took up ecclesiastical responsibilities for areas that tended to correspond to the geographic administrative areas of the empire. Then as the empire became weak and ineffective, the transition of the idea of the “diocese” as primarily an ecclesiastical one was easy if not obvious. Through this process, the region associated with the bishop became the “diocese” or “episcopal see” of today rather than the local city. Even so, the need for and the concept of a leader of the local geographic area remained intact. Only the names changed.

And so in Germany, even before the reformation began, the church was generally organized locally into regions which individually were called a parish (*Pfarre*, *Pharre*).³ Just as with the city of the bishop of old, within the parish there could be and often were multiple ecclesiastical entities, assemblies, or buildings. In the Wittenberg parish there was the city church (*Stadtkirche*), the castle church (*Schloßkirche*), the University, and the Augustinian monastery where various preaching, teaching, and worship activities occurred. In addition, to

³ Luther makes comment that he believed there were about 1800 parishes in Saxony. “A Sermon on Keeping Children in School,” 1530, LW 46, 231-234.

these there were the surrounding farming villages that belonged to the parish where preaching and teaching occurred.

The head clergyman over such a parish was called the *Pfarrherr* (often *Pastor* in Latin). He was the equivalent in Luther's day to the city bishop in the ancient church. He was the ecclesiastical overseer of the church in his city and surrounding area, including all related institutions in so far as they involved the teaching the word of God. This included the city schools and the teachers therein in so far as they gave religious instruction to the children.⁴

In addition, in larger parishes there would be various clergy under the *Pfarrherr* who assisted in the parish work.⁵ Wittenberg was typical in this regard in that in Luther's day the parish typically had three assistant ministers who held the title *Diakon* (Deacon).⁶

Alongside these titles and historical facts of the organization of the Saxon parish, one should consider the explicit statements of the reformers themselves in terms of how they considered grades of offices in the church. They did not consider these grades or divisions (or those of the ancient church) to be of divine origin. And they did not think it was necessary for them to be the same in all places. Instead, they taught that all those who had a call to preach

⁴ In an analogous way, one could apply this principle in America to schools operating as part of congregations even when they had no relationship to the city or state. And this is precisely the model that Walther and Missouri followed as they encouraged establishment of schools within Lutheran congregations. As one example of an article which applied this idea to the church / school in the Missouri Synod, see C.A.T. Selle, "Das Amt Des Pastors Als Schulaufseher," *Evang.-Luth. Schulblatt* 4:129-54.

⁵ Luther states that every parish should have a *Pfarrherr* and a *Küster* (Sacristan - one who cares for the church and property) but larger parishes would also have one or more specialized personnel: *Prediger* (one focused specifically on preaching and teaching), *Diakon* (deacon) or *Kaplan* (chaplain).

⁶ All these offices are mentioned in many places in Luther. But Luther brings them altogether in his argument for improving the education of children in LW 46, 231-234.

and administer the sacraments have the same basic office even if one is made *Pfarrherr* or bishop over the others for the sake of order.⁷

The question for the translator is how to handle such terms which are unfamiliar to the English reader. The general terms of our day “pastor” or “preacher” allow no precision in terms of the grades of office that are part of our context. One can attempt to make use of “head pastor” (for *Pfarrherr*) and “assistant pastors” (for *Kaplan*, *Diakon* etc.). And I have done so in the past. But “head pastor” does not carry the same geographic sense as *Pfarrherr*. The problem of vocabulary is acute enough that I decided to take the approach of using English terms that have one to one correspondence with their German counterparts even if they are not in common use and must to be accompanied by definition and explanation.

So for *Pfarrherr* I have decided to make use of an unfortunate term “parish rector.” It is unfortunate in that it is not a contemporary English term for any common church office.⁸ But as a counter point of self-defense, it is not completely without precedent.⁹ One must risk a bit of tedium for the sake of clarity.

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

Diakon is a title for a concrete office. This was an assistant to the parish rector. They were ordained preachers who administered the sacraments. This word does not occur in the

⁷ For example, “it is our greatest wish to maintain church-polity and the grades in the church even though they have been made by human authority.” (Ap 14, 24).

⁸ A “rector” in English is generally associated with an academic institution not a parish.

⁹ See Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Theology and Practice of “the Divine Call”* report (St Louis: Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, 2003), pg. #13 where “*Pfarrherr*” is translated “rector.”

Wittenberg letter. But it does appear in the introduction and in a footnote. I have used “assisting deacon” for this term. In Wittenberg there were three regular ministers with the title *Diakon*.¹⁰

The *Kaplan* was also an assistant to the parish rector and generally engaged in teaching and administering the sacraments.¹¹ It was a common title used in many different places.¹² In the Wittenberg opinion translated here, the title is included among the other church workers that the city council is not to appoint without the knowledge and approval of the parish rector. I have chosen to use “assistant preacher” here.

Both the *Diakon* and *Kaplan* were recognized by Luther as “Christian bishops” along with the parish rector.¹³ And by the Elector’s command of 1535, they were to be ordained.¹⁴

¹⁰ Georg Rörer, for example, was ordained as *Diakonus* of the Wittenberg parish. WA 38,403.

¹¹ As an example, from January 28, 1546 until his death a few weeks later, Luther was in Eisleben to settle a dispute between the ruling members of the Mansfeld dynasty. Count Albrecht had built a new village for the miners outside of Eisleben which caused a great controversy of the patronage rights of the church in Eisleben (See LW 50, 281 and WA Br 12, 364f.). In a document written on the 16th of February, only two days before his death, Luther and Jonas gave their suggestion for resolution of the problems and suggested how the church in the Castle of the Landgraves in Mansfeld should relate to the church in the city of Mansfeld and to the church in Eisleben. In the *Schloßkirche* or Castle Church there was to be a *Kaplan* who should help the *Schloßprediger* and who should administer the sacrament and make sure that the ceremonies are held in an orderly manner (WA Br 12, 368). Further, “the *Kaplan* should administer the sacrament, and on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday have a German reading from the sermons of Dr. Luther and receive 100 florins yearly for support.”

¹² In another case, in 1533 a student from the University was added to the Wittenberg parish staff and was given the title *Kaplan* alongside the three assistants who had the title *Diakon*. This student generally helped the assisting ministers care for the outlying villages by teaching and catechizing the children. He was not to administer the sacrament unless it was an emergency. The three with the title *Diakon* were permitted to administer the sacrament although the villagers in general were to attend the City Church to receive the sacrament. See WA Br 11, 104-105.

¹³ “For this reason we recognize and assert on behalf of God the Holy Spirit that Christian bishops are honorable, married, mature, good men, learned in the word of truth, many in a single city, who are chosen by the neighboring bishops or by their own people. They might be the very ones whom we now call parish priests, and their chaplains and deacons.” LW 36, 158.

¹⁴ WA 38, 407.

A final comment is that the term "Visitation" that occurs here refers to the regular ongoing inspections of the churches and schools in Saxony in regard to the state of those institutions. This was a system of oversight instituted by the Elector for the church in his territory in the 1520's. Details of the visitations can be found elsewhere.

Introduction provided by the Weimar Edition editors¹⁵

At the beginning of 1536 conflict broke out again in Zwickau between the city council and the parish rector on account of the calling of those who minister in church and school.¹⁶ The parish rector¹⁷, Leonard Beyer, claimed the right to choose assistant preachers and assisting deacons on account of the Order of Visitation, or at least so he said. He claimed the right “to present and send them to Wittenberg and to ordain and anoint such people.” The council stated to the contrary that “the [right of] election remained with it and not with the parish rector and that he just wanted to retain the old lordship [of the papal clerics] over them.” After they had chosen [the candidates], the council wanted to present the chosen to the rector, who then for his part could take care of the corresponding notification of Wittenberg. With a heavy heart Beyer submitted. He requested that the council “for the sake of peace and unity agree that no one would be forced (into office), and that no one would be presented and assigned without his will and foreknowledge. The council promised to abide by this wish of the pastor. Soon thereafter controversy broke out again. Beyer began with gibes made from the pulpit. When the council protested to him about this he appeared one day in a council meeting to complain about the actions of the council in the calling of “those who serve in the school”. Already earlier the council had overstepped its authority, in that it had accepted [into office] the “School Master” (that is, Peter Plateanus, who on May 5, 1535 was assigned as (school) rector of the gymnasium) without his, the parish rector’s, foreknowledge and will. And more recently once

¹⁵ In this translation I have omitted various references given by the WA edition editors to their external sources. I have also omitted a section in the middle of the Introduction which provides more background as to how the controversy played out in Zwickau but which does not bring any further insight to the doctrinal and linguistic matters of interest here.

¹⁶ “wegen der Berufung der Kirchen- und Schuldiener”

¹⁷ “Pfarrer”

again, in the selection of a new teacher (that is, Nicolas Rudolf)¹⁸ into the office of Jerome Nopus. “Infringement [by the council] on his office, in which the Holy Spirit has set him, has occurred.” On account of this he felt compelled to call for a decision of the Wittenberg leaders.

...

From letters by Liborius Magdeburg to Stephan Roth, we know that Beyer himself held the *iudicium* in Wittenberg.¹⁹ He arrived there on July 20. Spalatin was in Wittenberg from July 16 to July 22, and obviously also still on the 24th. It is interesting, that Melanchthon added an absentee opinion: “And to me, Philip Melanchthon, it appears to be right, just, and useful, that the calling of assisting deacons and of those who teach in the school, should be jointly in possession of the council and the pastor of the church.”²⁰

¹⁸ See WA Br 7, 408.

¹⁹ That is, he went to Wittenberg and helped direct the discussions regarding his complaints. The WA editors make the comment that it is regrettable that the Zwickau council was not given equal opportunity to be heard at the *iudicium* in Wittenberg.

²⁰ “*Et mihi, Philippo Melanthoni, rectum, iustum et utile videtur, ut vocatio diaconorum et orum, qui codent in shcola, sit communiter penes senatum et pastorem Ecclesiae.*” WA Br 7, 477.

Letter Communicating Wittenberg's Formal Opinion to the City Council of Zwickau

After our gospel and doctrine, it is most important that one should distinguish well between the two kingdoms, the worldly and the spiritual, and not intermingle them, as long as an emergency or lack of people do not compel us to do so. That is, wherever there are people who govern town hall²¹ and the city, and again, where there are people who look after the parish office²² and the churches, one should not interfere in any part of the office of the other. Rather let each receive his own (office) commended unto his conscience, as St. Peter teaches: "We should not be a meddler in other men's matters."²³ From the beginning these two offices were segregated by Christ. And experience all too often shows that there can be no peace where the town council or the city want to rule the parish, or vice versa, where the parish rector wants to rule the government or the city, as the example of the papacy showed us all too well.

Accordingly we beseech and admonish you, Parish Rector and Teacher Leonard, good friend, that in this matter you in Zwickau should hold fast to the decisions of the Visitation-Articles²⁴ and of the later Electoral Recess.²⁵ For the devil does not take a vacation. Flesh and blood are not good. And the people of this dangerous age are strange and facetious, many of whom seek not what is required for peace and unity but rather what their desire and curiosity demand.

²¹ "*Rathaus*"

²² "*Pfarramt ... versorgen*"

²³ 1 Pet. 4:15

²⁴ The Weimar edition points out that the Ruling of the Visitors for Zwickau from January 30, 1529 states "that the (city) council from now on should take on preachers with the knowledge and consideration of the Pastor." WA Br 7, 478 n. 2.

²⁵ In this context a Recess is a decree of an electoral or imperial diet, or assembly.

Accordingly, no peace or unity can remain wherever the assistant preacher²⁶, the school master, and others who serve in the church²⁷, etc. know that they are able to be in the office of the church without the knowledge and will of the parish rector²⁸, realizing that on this basis they can appeal to the city council and defy (the rector), since (in a controversy) one can always find supporters against the parish rector. Thus, if they²⁹ should intentionally accept or sanction an assistant preacher, a schoolmaster, or church worker³⁰ without (your) knowledge or consent, you should not concede or grant that precedent. Just as we here in Wittenberg, in accordance with the Visitation, indeed even allow the parish rector to take on or dismiss (such people) without the knowledge and counsel of the secular government. And as far as we know, this is how all the other cities proceed. And when there is no one else to ask, the Visitors, (as opposed to the city council), are entreated for this reason.³¹

The secular government has enough of its own to do. It should not interfere in the affairs of others. It is not to burden itself with unnecessary duties of ruling. It also has a vexing authority. Neither Zwickau nor any other city should be ashamed to follow the example of Wittenberg and other cities, because it is in accordance with the Order of Visitation. To diverge from such common order does not create a good mindset but rather, in the end, causes division and

²⁶ “*Kaplan*”, (chaplain or assistant preacher). See my introductory comments.

²⁷ “*Kirchendiener*”. The term *Kirchendiener* is an abstraction somewhat like our word “clergy” but even more abstracted than that. It is a broader term. No one held a concrete title or job description with this name. But it could include everything from *Prediger*, *Bischof*, and *Kaplan*, to *Schulmeister*, sacristan, organist etc. The context here does not indicate any clear reason to take the word in anything other than its widest sense.

²⁸ “wo der Kaplan, Schulmeister, Kirchendiener wissen, daß sie ohn Wissen und Willen des Pfarrherrns mügen im Kirchenamt sein”

²⁹ I.e., the city council.

³⁰ “*Kirchendiener*”.

³¹ To ratify appointments to local church offices. The last part of this sentence is obscure. But I think this is the proper sense.

devastation of the churches. We should thank God that our churches have been brought to and are settled a little bit into a similar order. And God will give no good fortune to them who break such order and unity on account of their own ambition and conceit except in an emergency. God help and strengthen us all in right faith and untarnished love. Amen.

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

Doctor Martin Luther

Johannes Bugenhagen

George Spalatin