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Table of Contents

Justification: Jesus vs. Paul David P. Scaer	195
The Doctrine of Justification in the 19th Century: A Look at Schleiermacher's <i>Der christliche Glaube</i> Naomichi Masaki	213
Evangelicals and Lutherans on Justification: Similarities and Differences Scott R. Murray	231
The Finnish School of Luther Interpretation: Responses and Trajectories Gordon L. Isaac	251
Gerhard Forde's Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response Jack Kilcrease	269
The Ministry in the Early Church Joel C. Elowsky	295
Walther and AC V Roland Ziegler	313
Research Notes	335
<i>The Gospel of Jesus' Wife: A Modern Forgery?</i>	

Theological Observer	338
Notes on the NIV	
The Digital 17th Century	
Preparing the First English Edition of Johann Gerhard's <i>Theological Commonplaces</i>	
Can There Be Peace? Violence in the Name of Religion	
Book Reviews	359
Books Received	380
Indices for Volume 76 (2012)	382

Justification and the Office of the Holy Ministry

The first five articles in this issue were originally papers presented at the 35th Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions held in Fort Wayne on January 18–20, 2012 under the theme “Justification in a Contemporary Context.” The final two articles, by Joel Elowsky and Roland Ziegler, were first delivered as the plenary papers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Theology Professors Conference that met at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, on May 29 to June 1, 2012, under the theme “To Obtain Such Faith . . . The Ministry of Teaching the Gospel” (AC V). It has been the practice of the two seminary journals to alternate in publishing plenary papers from this bi-annual conference in order that these studies may be shared with the wider church.

The Editors

The Ministry in the Early Church

Joel C. Elowsky

In this essay, I am going to paint, in rather broad brushstrokes, a picture of what the ministry looked like in the early church, how it organized itself, and how it saw itself in light of its purpose and authority. We will proceed by examining the three main periods—the New Testament, the period before Nicea (Ante-Nicene), and the Constantinian or Imperial Church—and conclude with some brief observations.

I. Ministry in the New Testament Church and Beyond

After Christ established his ministry in an anticipatory way in Matthew 18, he did so more fully in John 20 when he breathed his Spirit on his disciples and gave them the office of the keys along with the authority to preach (Mark 16:16), baptize (Mark 16:16; Matt 28:19), and celebrate the supper (Matt 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:19–20). The church then moved very quickly beyond the ministry of the twelve apostles, claiming no less than the sanction of Christ himself to do so. In 1 Corinthians and Ephesians, the Apostle Paul details those who were added *by Christ*¹ to the ministry of the church. In 1 Cor 12:28, he mentions “first apostles, second prophets, third teachers.” Then he adds to the list: miracle workers, then those who have gifts of healing, helpers, administrators, those who can speak in various kinds of tongues. In Ephesians 4:11–12, we hear that “[Christ] gave some as apostles, as prophets, as evangelists, as pastors and teachers, for the work of ministry, for the upbuilding of the body of Christ.” This indicates a much larger group than the twelve apostles. Ambrosiaster, in his commentary on this passage, takes this to mean that, at the beginning, everybody was involved in the work that Christ gave the apostles because there was mission work to do; the more hands, the better:

At the beginning they [perhaps those in the ministry listed in Eph 4:11?] had all preached and baptized on whatever day and at whatever time was convenient. Philip did not fix a day or a time for the eunuch’s baptism . . . Paul and Silas did not waste any time in

¹ See Didymus’ comments, *On Zechariah (Sur Zacharie)* 1.228, ed Louis Doutreleau, *Sources Chretiennes*, vol. 83 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962), 310.

baptizing the jailer and all his household nor did Peter have clerks or set a day when he would baptize Cornelius with all his household. He did not do it himself in fact, but ordered the brethren from Joppa who had gone up with him to Cornelius to do so. Up to that time too, no one had been ordained, apart from seven deacons. It was to allow the people to grow and multiply that at the beginning everyone [in the various ministries enumerated] was allowed to evangelize, to baptize and to expound the Scriptures in the church. But when the Church was established everywhere, places of meeting were established and rulers (*rectores*) and other offices in the Churches were appointed so that none of the clergy who had not been ordained to it should venture to take to himself an office which he knows not to have been committed or granted to him.²

Ambrosiaster paints a picture of a church where, initially, roles seem interchangeable. His reasoning is that a missionary church grows best when everyone is involved.³ But, Ambrosiaster says, this changed once churches were established, a change that occurred already in the New Testament age. As the initial missionary phase gave way to a necessary order and structure, many of these offices over the decades that followed slowly dropped out or were absorbed by other offices. The offices that disappeared were the ones associated largely with the mission work of the rapidly growing church: the apostles, prophets, and those with charismatic gifts (Acts 2; 8:15–17 [Samaria]; 10–11 [Cornelius; Gentiles], 13:8 [Salamis; Paul casting out demons]; 19:6 [Ephesus]). As the church became established in more and more areas, there were fewer new areas for the Gospel to go, and the apostles, the prophets, and the charismatic gifts all decreased and faded away. Origen already testified that this was the case

² Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Ephesians 4.11–12, Ancient Christian Texts: Commentaries on Galatians-Philemon: Ambrosiaster*, trans. and ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press Academic, 2009), 49. Hereafter referenced as Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Ephesians, ACT*. The bracketed notes are mine. You will find similar comments in other fathers, such as Chrysostom's comments in his *Homily on Ephesians* 11.4.11–12, in John Chrysostom, *Interpretatio Omnium Epistularum Paulinarum*, ed. F. Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1849–1862), 4:218. See next note.

³ See also the comments of the reformers in dialog with Jerome. They cite Jerome, "Ep. 146 ad Evangelum," (*Patrologia cursus completus: Series latina*, 217 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris: Migne 1844–1864] 22:1193–1195) and other fathers and councils in support of their position that bishops were basically no different than presbyters in the early church, except that one was chosen to preside over the others to avoid schism and to ordain. See the *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope* 5–11, 60–63 in the translation provided in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 332–333, 340.

in the third century, and Irenaeus hinted at it even at the close of the second century. An exception occurred in certain pockets of charismatic activity, such as Carthaginian North Africa at the time of Tertullian in the third century.⁴

The fathers speak of the ministry operating on two tracks in the first centuries of the church: the missionary track and the local church track. The apostles, prophets, and teachers remain, we learn from the *Didache*, but largely as itinerants. They go from place to place establishing and strengthening churches so that faith will be created.⁵ But the church also had to guard itself against charlatans and false itinerant preachers who might bring dishonor on the Gospel. An apostle is not to stay for more than a day, the *Didache* says. If he stays more than three days, he is a false prophet; likewise, if a prophet asks for money, he is a false prophet (*Didache* 11.5, 12). The rapidly expanding church needed to put down roots and to discern what was real from what was ephemeral; otherwise, it would be a mile wide and an inch deep—something we see happening in the faster-growing churches of the majority world, such as Africa, Asia and Latin America. To provide some continuity and rootedness, the *Didache* says, the community is to go beyond the apostles and prophets and “appoint . . . bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord: men who are humble and not avaricious and true and approved, for they too carry out for you the ministry of the prophets and teachers” (*Didache* 15.1–2). Bishops and deacons, along with presbyters, carry on the work of the prophets, apostles, and teachers at the local level in the one ministry that Christ gave to his church.

The *Didache*, of course, is reflecting what Paul in the previous century had counseled Timothy and Titus to do in each of the cities he had visited. In Titus 1:5, he tells Titus that one of the things lacking in the cities he has visited are πρεσβύτεροι. You cannot have a church without πρεσβύτεροι. They were to establish a college of presbyters in each city, similar to the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which was made up of the elders (πρεσβύτεροι), the chief priests, and the rulers. But then Paul refers to those same πρεσβύτεροι two verses later as ἐπίσκοποι (Titus 1:5, 7). In the book of Acts, Paul also refers to the presbyters of Ephesus as bishops, or overseers, who are to feed the flock as pastors would (Acts 20:28). As the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope notes, the terms are interchangeable at

⁴ For a more complete account with reference to various fathers, see Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, vol. 4, *Ancient Christian Doctrine Series* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 267–288; see especially 277–284.

⁵ The account we have in Acts that focuses on Peter and Paul was no doubt repeated by other apostles, prophets, and teachers as well.

this stage. Presbyters or elders were the mature leaders of the church; in Judaism, they were the only ones ordained among the Jewish leadership,⁶ modeled on the Jewish Sanhedrin, and they would have been in charge of church discipline and taken care of matters of jurisdiction. The ἐπίσκοποι or bishops were often city public officials in Hellenism occupying positions of leadership, their chief purpose being the oversight of others.⁷ Both bishops and presbyters were terms closely associated with the apostles. All three of Jesus' inner circle—the apostles Peter, James, and John—refer to themselves in their letters as presbyters (1 Pet 5:1; 2 John 1:1; 3 John 1:1).⁸ The apostles also thought of themselves as bishops; Peter speaks of the vacant “bishopric”⁹ of Judas that needed to be filled (Acts 1:20). The apostles already understood themselves as both bishops and presbyters, so the question of how to derive the positions of bishop and presbyter from the apostles is, in one sense, moot—the apostles had already done so themselves. Apostles are bishops, but not all bishops are apostles; bishops are presbyters, but not all presbyters are bishops.¹⁰ There was no rigid demarcation; the titles were also descriptors of the office. The presbyter-bishops were appointed by Paul and the other apostles, along with Timothy and Titus, in order to guard against false gospels and teachings that ran contrary to what they had received from the apostles, who in turn had received their message from Christ himself (1 Tim 3:2; 4:14; 6:20–21; 2 Tim 1:13–14; Titus 1:9). The authority for what they were doing came from Christ himself.

The apostles and those they appointed were never to forget the reason Jesus had commissioned them. Deacons were appointed in Acts 6 to prevent the apostles from being distracted by the equivalent of “waiting on tables,” so they could devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer that Christ had given to them. The deacons became the *de facto* social ministry people, but they also functioned liturgically, assisting with

⁶ John Knox, “The Ministry in the Primitive Church,” in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 21.

⁷ See Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (TDNT), trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1987), 2:611–614.

⁸In Rev 5:4, the elders are the ones who sit around the divine throne, twenty-four of them altogether, representing Old and New Testament Israel. We do not hear of deacons or bishops in Revelation, only elders. Most of the early church agreed that the writer of the Revelation is the same person who refers to himself as the πρῶτος κληρικός called by the lady (the church) and her children in the Johanne epistles.

⁹The Greek word there is τὴν ἐπισκοπήν.

¹⁰ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on 1 Timothy* 3.8, 128.

baptisms and also ensuring proper preparation for the elements to be used in the Eucharist. They did not baptize, nor did they preside at the Eucharist, but they occupied an important role in ensuring that all things were done decently and in order so that the presbyter-bishops could focus on the tasks given to them by Christ and his apostles.

The deaconesses came shortly after the appointment of the deacons. Clement of Alexandria tells us that women also accompanied the apostles on their missionary journeys in order to protect the apostles' reputation. The women's presence allowed them "to reach the women, without giving rise to malicious gossip."¹¹ The deaconesses also served at worship by seating the women in the assembly, and outside of worship by making home visits to female church members. We know that the church grew fastest among the women of the ancient world, which again testifies to the important role that deaconesses occupied, especially in the churches of the East.¹²

II. The Ante-Nicene Church: Clement of Rome and the Role of the Presbytery and the Presbyter-Bishop

One of the earliest churches established by Paul was in Corinth. As a contemporary of John the evangelist, elder, and apostle, Clement of Rome wrote to the church at Corinth fifty or so years later, towards the end of the first century. Clement, as the head presbyter in Rome,¹³ writes this authoritative disciplinary letter to the congregation in Corinth, a congregation that had already seen its share of fights during the time of the apostle Paul. Things had not changed much fifty years later.

In his letter, which can be dated to A.D. 95–96, Clement tells us that the strife in the church at Corinth still revolved largely around the pastoral office, just as it had in Paul's day: "The well-established and ancient church of the Corinthians" was rebelling against its college of presbyters because of one or two people.¹⁴ A few people had, in fact, been successful in having some pastors, "their good conduct notwithstanding, [removed] from the ministry which had been held in honor by them blamelessly."¹⁵

¹¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 3.6.53.

¹² See Paul Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1990), 83–92.

¹³ Irenaeus refers to him as the third bishop of Rome after Peter and Linus. See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.

¹⁴ *Clement* 47.

¹⁵ *Clement* 44.6. For a contemporary instance of almost the same incident, see the January (2012) issue of *Forum Letter*, where Peter Speckhard muses about why it is that pastors are expected to keep their vows while congregations are not.

However, the dissension and strife that happened at Corinth over the office of the ministry was no surprise:

Our apostles . . . knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife over the bishop's office. For this reason, therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the officials mentioned earlier and afterwards they gave the offices a permanent character; that is, if they should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. (*1 Clement* 44.1-2)

Clement does not tell us how the apostles did this; he assumes it is common knowledge. Nonetheless, Clement goes on to provide the theological justification for his assertion that subsequent bishops and presbyters have the same authority that the apostles had to preach and teach the Gospel (*1 Clement* 42-43) and administer the sacraments, which he refers to as "the offering of the sacrifice" (*1 Clement* 44.4). They were given such authority through an order established ultimately by God that goes all the way back to (1) the cosmic order of creation (*1 Clement* 40.1-4), (2) the Levitical structure of the priesthood in the Old Testament (*1 Clement* 40.6), and, finally, (3) the structure Christ himself had received and passed on to the apostles in the New Testament. Concerning this third point he writes,

The apostles received the gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus the Christ was sent forth from God. So then Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ. Both, therefore, came of the will of God in good order. Having therefore received their orders . . . they went forth with the firm assurance that the Holy Spirit gives, preaching the good news. . . . So preaching both in the country and in the towns, they appointed their firstfruits, when they had tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons for the future believers. And this was no new thing they did, for indeed something had been written about bishops and deacons many years ago; for somewhere thus says the Scripture: "I will appoint their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith."¹⁶

Appointing successors was no new thing, in other words. It was done in the Old Testament with Moses and Joshua and prophesied in the LXX (if not in the Hebrew) version of Isaiah 60:17. It was also foreshadowed with the threefold priesthood of the Old Covenant: "For to the high priest the proper services have been given, and to the priests the proper office has been assigned, and upon the Levites the proper ministries have been

¹⁶ Isa 60:17 (LXX)—not in the Hebrew. *1 Clement* 42.1-5, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 75.

imposed" (1 *Clement* 40.6). Clement sees the threefold office of his day already mirrored in the Old Testament Levitical Priesthood in which there were high priest, priests, and Levites. "The layman (λαϊκος)," Clement says, however, "is bound by the layman's rules" (1 *Clement* 40.6). The ministry established by Christ can only be dissolved by him, even though some laymen had taken matters into their own hands in removing some of the presbyters. In response, Clement says, "Let each of you, brothers, in his proper order, give thanks to God, maintaining a good conscience, not overstepping the designated rule of his ministry, but acting with reverence" (1 *Clement* 41). He believes this order had been established by God, not by human beings.

It was not as if laymen had no role in the church. The pattern that had been established in the choosing of deacons continued, with the earliest ordinations to the episcopate most likely conducted entirely by the local church, according to Paul Bradshaw.¹⁷ However, Bradshaw cautions that this fact should not be taken to indicate "some notion of the ideal of democracy in early Christianity."¹⁸

Nor was it seen as in any way opposed to the divine calling of a minister, but on the contrary it was understood as the means by which God's choice of a person for a particular ecclesiastical office was discerned and made manifest. As both early Christian writings and the prayers in the rites themselves make clear, it was always considered that it was God who chose and ordained the ministers through the action of the Church.¹⁹

Church and ministry worked together—most of the time. As time went on, the role of the local church did diminish. By the third century, as we learn from Cyprian of Carthage,

[A] candidate for the episcopate [still] required the approval both of the local church and also of the neighboring bishops. It was this, rather than any theory of sacramental transmission, that led to the presence and involvement of the [neighboring bishops] in the rite of

¹⁷ Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites*, 21–22. The people did have the right to refuse, and did on occasion. The fifth century historian Philostorgius tells us that when Demophilos, an Arian bishop, was being foisted upon the people of Constantinople in A.D. 370, any number of people shouted "anaxios" (unworthy) instead of "axios" (worthy). Philostorgius *Hist. Eccl.* 9.10 (*Patrologia cursus completus: Series graeca*, 162 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris: Migne 1857–1886] 65:576C), citation from Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites*, 25, fn 16.

¹⁸ Paul Bradshaw, "A Brief History of Ordination Rites," in *Services and Prayers for the Church of England: Ordination Services: Study Edition* (London: Church Publishing House, 2007), 111.

¹⁹ Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites*, 22.

Episcopal ordination. In the case of the presbyterate and diaconate at this time, the right of nomination seems to have rested with the bishop, but he did not normally act without the advice of the clergy and people.²⁰

But how did the candidates for bishop arise out of the presbytery? George Williams surmises that one of the presbyters from among the college of presbyters became accustomed to presiding over the Eucharist and ultimately became identified with the priesthood, since the Eucharist was often referred to in the early church as “the sacrifice,” due to the close connection with the events of Calvary. As Williams puts it,

By contagion and imputation the Eucharist president himself became looked upon as at least analogous to the high priest of the Old Covenant and the spokesman of the entire royal priesthood which is the church. Though he was normally one of the presbyters, the cultual president acquired, through his supervision of the deacons, a pre-eminence over the presbyters in their corporate capacity.²¹

This, he says, coupled with “conflicting and sometimes irresponsible claims and vagaries put forward by certain prophets and teachers conspired to bring also the surviving ‘charismatic’ ministries under the oversight of the bishop in order to assure the theological solidarity of the Christian community ever in peril of its life from a hostile populace and an intermittently persecuting magistracy.”²²

For these reasons a single bishop arose out of the presbytery about which Ignatius of Antioch (d. ca. 112) can say,

[W]hen you are subject to the bishop, it is evident to me that you are living not in accordance with human standards but in accordance with Jesus Christ. . . . It is essential, therefore, that you continue your current practice and do nothing without the bishop, but be subject also to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ. . . . Furthermore, it is necessary that those who are deacons of the “mysteries”²³ of Jesus Christ please everyone in this respect. For they are not merely “deacons” of food and drink [Acts 6:1–6] but ministers of God’s church. Therefore they must avoid criticism as though it were fire. Similarly, let everyone respect the deacons

²⁰ Bradshaw, *Ordination Rites*, 22.

²¹ Williams, “Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church,” in *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives*, 28.

²² Williams, “Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church,” 28.

²³ See 1 Cor 4:1, “οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ.”

as Jesus Christ, just as they should respect the bishop, who is a model of the Father, and the presbyters as God's council and as the band of the apostles. Without these no group can be called a church.²⁴

According to Ignatius, there is no church without her bishops, her college of presbyters, and her deacons. The presbytery continues its association with the apostles, but the bishop's association is elevated to the one who sent the apostles—in other words, Jesus. The bishop is in relationship to Jesus as Jesus is to the Father;²⁵ when you honor the bishop, he says, you are honoring God.²⁶ Likewise, when you act in harmony with the mind of the bishop, you are, in effect, acting with the mind of Christ.²⁷ The bishop is to be regarded as Lord;²⁸ this is why nothing that pertains to the church²⁹ is to be done apart from the bishop.³⁰

You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and follow the presbytery as you would the apostles; respect the deacons as the commandment of God. Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid (βεβαία)/certain. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be; just as wherever Christ is, there is the catholic church. It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop. Rather, whatever he approves is also pleasing to God, in order that everything you do may be trustworthy and certain (βεβαίον).³¹

Why is the presence of the bishop so important that nothing in the church can be done without him?³² There are at least two reasons, Ignatius tells us: to avoid division and to ensure trustworthiness and certainty (βεβαίον) in whatever the church does. βεβαίον means, "reliable; firm,

²⁴ *To the Trallians* 2.1–3.1; Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 159–161.

²⁵ Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 3.2, "For Jesus Christ, our inseparable life, is the mind of the Father, just as the bishops appointed throughout the world are in the mind of Christ."

²⁶ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 9, "It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil."

²⁷ Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 4.1.

²⁸ Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 6.1.

²⁹ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.1.

³⁰ Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 7.2; *To the Trallians* 2.2, 7.2; *To the Philadelphians* 7.2.

³¹ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.1–3. Note the importance of certainty, of which the bishop is the primary guarantor.

³² Ignatius, *To the Magnesians* 7.2; *To the Trallians* 2.2, 7.2; *To the Philadelphians* 7.2; *To the Smyrnaeans* 8.1.

well-founded; confirmed, verified; effective.”³³ This is why the bishop is to be listened to and obeyed.³⁴

The picture we have with Ignatius and the other bishops of the second and third centuries is of a ministry where the bishop is acting as the *paterfamilias* (οἰκοδεσπότης), the “administrator” (οἰκονόμος) of the οἶκος θεοῦ. He is the head of the household, with the presbyters and deacons taking care of the household chores, so to speak. As father of the house, he seeks to enlarge the family through Baptism over which he continued to preside, and to feed his family through the Eucharist, which provided spiritual food and the medicine of immortality.³⁵ The father also makes sure he has many sons to carry on his legacy. Thus, the *vivâ voce* (the living voice) of the apostles and their teaching is provided through their successors, according to Tertullian³⁶ and Irenaeus.³⁷ Apostolic succession provides the nascent church with a level of βέβαιον (i.e., certainty) in an uncertain world where, at least at that time, the Scriptures were not as accessible as they are today, though heretical teachers were accessible—and still are. People went to church and consulted their bishop as the final authority in matters of faith and doctrine.

In summary, the elevation of the bishop is probably one of the most significant developments in the ministry of the Ante-Nicene church. As the bishop gained authority, power, and administrative duties, he also began to exercise jurisdiction beyond his parish, especially as churches began to hold more councils. This is evidenced especially in Carthage from at least the early third century, but also in Antioch, Alexandria, and Rome. Thus, due to the expanding duties of the bishop, many of his liturgical functions were given over to the local presbyters. This happened sooner with the Eucharist than with Baptism, which remained the purview of the bishop—with notable exceptions—for a much longer time.³⁸ Thus, wherever a presbyter was presiding over the sacrament, he became, like the bishop, a *sacerdos* or *hiereus* (i.e., a priest).³⁹ Much of the initial disciplinary and

³³ Bibleworks GNM Morphology + Barclay-Newman.

³⁴ Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 20.2; *To the Magnesians* 3.2.

³⁵ Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians* 20.2; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.2.2–3.

³⁶ See, for instance, Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics* 21 and 32.

³⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.3.3.

³⁸ An example is the church in Alexandria, where we hear of other clergy such as the presbyters performing baptisms, no doubt due to logistical considerations more than anything else; see Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Ephesians* 4:11, ACT, 49.

³⁹ The term “priest” is, in fact, connected etymologically to presbyter. See, among others, P. Hinchliff’s article “Presbyter” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. J.G. Davies (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 446. The English

supervisory responsibility of the presbyter had been gradually taken over by the bishops, so that by the time of Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (late fifth to early sixth century), the presbyter did not even figure in the hierarchy, having been fully replaced by the priest.⁴⁰

In the meantime, the duties of the deacons and deaconesses expanded, which entailed the everyday running of the church. The deacons and deaconesses themselves continued serving in the liturgy, their main tasks there being to help with baptisms and to ensure that the gifts for the Eucharist were prepared.⁴¹ The deacon, in particular, helped with the distribution of the cup, while the bishop reserved for himself the distribution of the host, which he did in connection with his role of discipline in determining who was to be admitted to the sacrament and who was to be refused. There were, however, also expanded duties inside and outside of the liturgy that needed attention. The deacon brought in help, so to speak, with the increasing needs of the congregation. Sub-offices, such as the subdeacon, were created that could comprise—depending on the church and the area—acolytes, exorcists, lectors, doorkeepers, gravediggers, and cantors/singers.⁴² The catechists were also important as teachers of those preparing for baptism, especially in Alexandria.⁴³ Arch-deacons, or head deacons, also arose to direct the work of the deacons under them. In the third century, this expanding cadre of workers associated with the church became semi-clericalized during the time of Cyprian: the Latin term was *clero proximi*,⁴⁴ which means “near/almost clerics.” By the time of the

word goes back to the German “*Priester*,” which in turn goes back to the Greek “*Presbyter*,” not to any Latin or other Greek root. Also, in the late patristic period, in his *De Civitate Dei* 20.10, Augustine says that bishops and presbyters are now properly called priests in the church. See *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (NPNF), First Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952-1957), 2:432.

⁴⁰ Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5.

⁴¹ The ordination rites seem to indicate that the deaconess would not have served at the altar.

⁴² For further background on these minor offices, see the article by A. Chupungco on the “*Diaconate*” in the forthcoming third edition of Angelo DiBerardino, *Encyclopedia of the Early Church* 3rd ed., English eds. Joel Elowsky and Thomas Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, forthcoming).

⁴³ See Pseudo-Clement, “*Epistle of Clement to James 13*,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: the Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325* (ANF), 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 8:220.

⁴⁴ Cyprian, *Epistle* 29.2. He uses the term “*clero proximos*” in the singular.

fourth century, many had become, in fact, part of the clergy—some ordained, like the lectors and acolytes; others not, like the gravediggers.⁴⁵

III. The Imperial Church

As we move into the fourth century, I follow the lead and will attempt to summarize the work of George Williams' *The Ministry in the Later Patristic Period (314–451)*⁴⁶ because he helpfully condenses what would amount to a very large body of literature, figures, and movements. He notes that the metropolitan churches had already become well established. There was an apparatus in place for carrying out the work of the church that had greatly expanded. The presbytery that had served as the disciplinary council in each city where it had been established was "well on its way towards disaggregation. The episcopate becomes a totally distinct order from the presbyterate by the time of the council of Nicea."⁴⁷ This can be seen, for instance, in the council's fourth canon, which stipulated the duties and responsibilities of the bishops in ordaining other bishops whose ratification occurred under the Metropolitan. Canon 4 of Nicea states:

It is by all means proper that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops in the province; but should this be difficult, either on account of urgent necessity or because of distance, three at least should meet together, and the suffrages of the absent [bishops] also being given and communicated in writing, then the ordination should take place. But in every province the ratification of what is done should be left to the Metropolitan.⁴⁸

By the time of the Council of Antioch in Encaeniis (A.D. 341), a candidate for bishop could be elevated, even against the wishes of the people of his see.⁴⁹ Even more, ordination had acquired the significance of a second baptism or a second penance that blotted out all but carnal sin,

⁴⁵ According to Martin Chemnitz, in a work attributed to Jerome, the ranks of clergy are listed as seven, leaving out the exorcists and acolytes. But it is also true that the enumerations varied. See *The Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4 vols., trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 2:686.

⁴⁶ George H. Williams, "The Ministry in the Later Patristic Period (314–451)," in H. Richard Niebuhr and Daniel D. Williams, eds., *The Ministry in Historical Perspectives* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 60–81.

⁴⁷ Williams, "Ministry in the Later Patristic Period," 60.

⁴⁸ *Council of Nicea*, Canon 4; translation from NPNF, Series 2, 14:11.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Canons 18 and 23. The epitome of Canon 18 says, "Let a bishop ordained but not received by his city have his part of the honour, and offer the liturgy only, waiting for the synod of the province to give judgment," NPNF, Series 2, 14:117.

according to Canon 9 of the Council of Neocaesarea.⁵⁰ Later on, at the time of Augustine's controversy with the Donatists, this evolved further into the teaching of the indelible character of the priest imposed through ordination.⁵¹ Celibacy also became a mark of the clergy. The Spanish Council of Elvira (A.D. 306) decreed that continence as distinct from celibacy was mandatory for all who presided at the altar.⁵²

Not everyone agreed with the burgeoning hierarchy, as our Lutheran Confessions acknowledge. Jerome,⁵³ Chrysostom,⁵⁴ Epiphanius,⁵⁵ Theodore of Mopsuestia,⁵⁶ and Theodoret⁵⁷ contended that bishops were simply presbyters who served a greater regional jurisdiction. The only thing that set bishops apart from presbyters was the authority to ordain, although, even in this regard, someone like Ambrosiaster could point out that presbyters of the ante-Nicean Alexandrian church had ordained others on occasion, and that their presbyters performed confirmations if the bishop was not present.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, as Williams contends, "these were not representative contentions, for the provincially organized and ecumenically minded episcopate had become fully conscious of participating in a *ministry*, as well as a *jurisdiction*, different from that of their subordinate presbyter-priests."⁵⁹

At this time, "the city 'parish' (*paroikia*) was becoming a diocese (though not yet in name) under its bishop while the presbyters were more

⁵⁰ See Council of Neocaesarea, Canon 9; NPNF 2 14:83. I was directed to these references provided by Williams, "Ministry in the Later Patristic Period," 62.

⁵¹ See Augustine, *Contra Epistulam Parmeniani* 2.13.28; *Corpus scriptorium ecclesiasticorum latinorum*, 51:79. See also Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 5.15; PL 35:1422; NPNF, Series 1, 7:37. Augustine originated his discussion of ordination from Baptism, insisting that what is true of Baptism is also true of ordination. See the article by H. E. J. Cowdrey, "Pope Anastasius II and St. Augustine's Doctrine of Holy Orders," *Studia Patristica* 11, pt. 2:311-315.

⁵² Canon 33; J.A. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius*, New Edition, rev. W.H.C. Frend (London: SPCK, 1987), 292.

⁵³ Jerome, *Letter 146, to Evangelus*.

⁵⁴ Chrysostom, *Homily XI, On 1 Timothy* 3.8-10; NPNF, Series 1, 13:441.

⁵⁵ Epiphanius, *Haereses* 75, although Epiphanius does argue for the distinction, he notes in the earliest layers of the church's history, that if there were not enough presbyters or bishops in a given city the presbyter might function as a bishop and there might only be bishops and deacons, as in Philippi. But otherwise normally there was a distinction.

⁵⁶ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Titus*, ed. H.B. Swete, *Theodori episcopi Mopsuesteni: In epistolas b. Pauli commentarii*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880), vol. 2:239, in ACCS XI: 287.

⁵⁷ Theodoret, *Interpretation of the Letter to Titus* 1.7; PG 82:859C-860C, in *ibid*.

⁵⁸ Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Ephesians* 4.12; ACTS 49.

⁵⁹ Williams, "Ministry in the Later Patristic Period," 62.

or less permanently assigned to outlying communities, or to the regional churches in the case of the more populous cities.”⁶⁰ Those presbyters who lived in the surrounding parishes of the bishop, and had moved out to outlying areas of the city, became known as *chorepiscopoi*, or country bishops. In many ways, these bishops had a closer connection with the people than did the city bishops, who were becoming more and more removed from the daily parish life to focus on administrative duties. Over time, however, the *chorepiscopoi* were eliminated, in no small part due to the fact that many of them had to become “worker priests” because of the small pay they received. At times, they engaged in part-time work that was not considered consistent with “the episcopal dignity.” Canon 6 of the Council of Sardica (A.D. 343) decreed that *chorepiscopoi* were no longer to be appointed and the Canon 54 of the Council of Laodicea (A.D. 363–364) had as its goal the replacement of all rural bishops with visitors from the city churches.

In the meantime, bishops became more involved in doctrinal disputes, such as at the Council of Nicea, or the many subsequent councils that were called to deal with various heresies and schisms. There were also disciplinary duties that many of the canons of these councils delegated to the bishops on a regional or sometimes empire-wide level. Paul had enjoined Christians not to take cases in dispute to the secular courts but to have such cases resolved by the church. This naturally had become the purview of the bishops-presbyters. However, as the bishop began to be further distinguished from the presbyters, deciding judicial cases became one more of his duties, and even more so when the newly Christian state was formed. Within the organizational structure of the Roman Empire, Williams notes, the bishop became, “as it were *ex officio*, the emperor’s ‘personal’ *defensores* of the municipalities to protect the local populations, Christian and otherwise, from any unfair practices of the local or provincial officialdom of the Empire.”⁶¹

The diaconate originally had served in its own right in the church, performing many of the important works of mercy along with its liturgical functions in the church. In time, however, the deacon had become more of an assistant to the bishop-presbyters-priests. In the imperial church, the diaconate came to be viewed as the initial rung on the proverbial ladder of the clergy that one stepped on in order to move up the order.⁶² This was

⁶⁰ Williams, “Ministry in the Later Patristic Period,” 60.

⁶¹ Williams, “Ministry in the Later Patristic Period,” 63.

⁶² Damasus, for example, moved all the way from deacon to pope. See Ambrosiaster’s tract, *On the Arrogance of the Roman Deacons*, whose title is self-

the ecclesiastical counterpart, as Williams notes, "of the succession of officers or the *cursum honorum* through which the magistrate normally advanced in the service of the state. Thus, the ministry became more of a career than a calling."⁶³ They became professional church workers who were "appropriately trained and promoted, even from one parish to another."⁶⁴ The diaconate, in some ways, had an inherent unfair advantage, at least over the presbyterate. This is due to the fact that some of the churches, such as Rome, limited the diaconal number to seven, dating back to the time of the Acts of the Apostles—"but with quite unapostolic prerequisites and powers." The more limited number of deacons meant that they were more in demand. This, coupled with their close association with the people due to the everyday activities in which they were involved, meant that they were often considered for election to the episcopate over some of the presbyters.⁶⁵ We know of some rather famous preachers who were deacons, such as Ephrem the Syrian, who is perhaps best known for the beautiful poetic imagery in his hymns.

Whereas in the period before Nicea there were no treatises devoted to the ministry, per se (it was more or less alluded to in the context of other arguments), during the fourth and fifth centuries, there are any number of such treatises written.⁶⁶ Many of these writers were critical of the hierarchical structure that had developed and perhaps even overdeveloped in the imperial church. Many of these works dealt with the spiritual life of the clergy—what we today would call pastoral formation. They were critical of the many who were entering into the ranks of the clergy as a way to advance themselves rather than to advance the Gospel. Christianity was now safe, but it had become institutionalized, bureaucratized, compromised, and anaesthetized to the needs of the people.

explanatory, also cited by Williams, "Ministry in the Later Patristic Period," 64. This, of course, varied from place to place, depending on how the various minor offices were ranked. Basil of Caesarea, for instance, began as a lector, not a deacon. Gregory of Nazianzus used him as an example to counsel candidates for higher ecclesiastical offices to pass through the lower orders first. Cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 43.27.

⁶³ Williams, "The Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church (125-325)," 29.

⁶⁴ Williams, "The Ministry of the Ante-Nicene Church (125-325)," 30.

⁶⁵ Williams, "Ministry in the Later Patristic Period," 64.

⁶⁶ The sayings of the desert fathers and the rule of Pachomius deal with the spiritual life of the monk or clergy; Ambrose wrote his *de Officiis* on the duties of the clergy modeled on Cicero's work by the same title; Theodore of Mopsuestia and Chrysostom both have works in the Antiochene tradition entitled, *On the Priesthood*; Gregory the Great wrote his *Pastoral Rule*, which details what every minister should know about almost every aspect of ministry and conduct. There are, for instance, practical guides on how to preach law and gospel in Part III of Gregory's *Rule*.

IV. Conclusion

The fathers in every age understood, as Luther did,⁶⁷ that the ministry is not ours; it is not even the church's, except by gift. It is first and foremost Christ's. Luther spoke of the danger of altering or improving this ministry: "then it becomes a nothing and Christ is no longer present, nor is his order."⁶⁸ The church in its history, especially during the imperial era, was constantly in danger of making this ministry "a nothing." On the one hand, offices and a structure that were intended to and did serve the church in the beginning ended up losing their servant character in some cases, with the result that the church served the structure. On the other hand, the initial structures that the church set up were erected to build a fence around the bishop, presbyters, and deacons so that they could carry out the core purpose of the office of the ministry, namely, the ministry of teaching and preaching the word and administering the sacraments in order to deliver God's gospel of forgiveness to his people. Sometimes, of course, they forgot that fences need gates, too.

The ministry in any age is in danger of losing its purpose. Only when it remembers the one who gave us that ministry—the one who did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped, the one who humbled himself by taking the very form of a servant (Phil 2:5–11)—only then can it know its true purpose, which always has been and always will be *diakonia*, service. The privilege of serving in this way is best summed up by John Chrysostom writing *On the Priesthood* at the end of the fourth century:

[E]arth's inhabitants, having their life in this world . . . have been entrusted with the stewardship of heavenly things. They have received an authority which God has not given to angels or arch-angels. Not to the [angels] was it said, "Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose, shall be loosed" [Matt 18:18]. Those who are lords on earth have indeed the power to bind, but only men's bodies. But this binding touches the very soul and reaches through heaven. What priests do on earth, God ratifies above. The Master confirms the decisions of his servants. Indeed, he has given them nothing less than the whole authority of heaven. For he says, "Whoever's sins you forgive are forgiven, and whoever's sins

⁶⁷ See Martin Luther's comments in *Concerning the Private Mass and the Ordination of Priests* (1533), *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 38:200; *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriftent]*, 65 vols. (Wiemar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993), 38:240,24.

⁶⁸ *AE* 38:200.

you retain, they are retained" [John 20:23]. What authority could be greater than that? "The Father has given all judgment to the Son" [John 5:22]. But I see that the Son has placed it all in their hands. For they have been raised to this prerogative, as though they were already translated to heaven and had transcended human nature and were freed from our passions."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood* 3.5. NPNF, Series 1, 9:47, adapted.

