

# EPISCOPAL ORDINATION AND THE BREAKER OF SUCCESSION: MARTIN LUTHER AND NICOLAUS VON AMSDORF

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## Abstract

This article explores Martin Luther's theological rationale and the historical context for the 1542 ordination of Nicolaus von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg—the first Lutheran bishop in Germany. Drawing on Luther's pamphlet *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen*, the article analyzes his rejection of apostolic succession, critique of Catholic sacramentalism, and redefinition of episcopal authority as a ministry of the Word. It also considers the political dynamics behind John Frederick I's imposition of Amsdorf, revealing tensions between theological ideals and pragmatic governance. The article argues that Luther's model reshaped ordination practices and Protestant ecclesiology for generations to come.

*Keywords:* Lutheran Reformation, church and state relations, episcopal ordination, apostolic succession, Martin Luther, Nicholas von Amsdorf, Protestant ecclesiology

## 1. Introduction

Martin Luther (1483–1546), an Augustinian monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, became widely known for his opposition to the papacy in the fall of 1517. His eventual break from the Roman Catholic

Church led to the formation of Protestant communities, yet these new churches initially resisted adopting an episcopal polity. The Wittenberg theologians, including Luther himself, long opposed the idea of establishing a Lutheran bishop. While Luther had ordained several pastors, the ordination of a Protestant bishop seemed inconceivable.

However, the death of Philip of the Palatinate (1480–1541)—bishop of both Freising in Bavaria and Naumburg in Saxony—twenty-four years later set in motion unprecedented developments. The Naumburg cathedral chapter favored the Catholic candidate Julius von Pflug (1499–1564) as Philip’s successor. Although many noblemen and knights remained loyal to the Catholic Church, the majority of the diocese had embraced the Protestant faith, and the citizens of Naumburg strongly supported the Reformation. After unsuccessful negotiations, Elector John Frederick I of Saxony (1503–1554) disregarded the cathedral chapter’s decision and imposed his own candidate, Nicolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565), a German theologian and Protestant reformer, as anti-bishop.<sup>1</sup> Although Luther was neither a bishop nor part of the apostolic succession, he ordained and installed Von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg on January 20, 1542. This event marked the first ordination of a Lutheran bishop in Germany.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly thereafter, in March 1542, Luther published the pamphlet *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen* (lit. an example of consecrating a true Christian bishop), in which he defended and explained this extraordinary action.<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the ordination appears to have been primarily religiously motivated; however, a closer examination of contemporary sources suggests that political considerations played a decisive role. The precise reasons for Luther’s change of stance on the matter remain unclear.

<sup>1</sup> D. O. Albrecht, “Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen. Geschehen zu Naumburg Anno 1542, 20. Januar,” in Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 53 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1920), 222 [hereafter referred to as WA].

<sup>2</sup> Peter Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg: Eine Untersuchung zur Gestalt des evangelischen Bischofamtens in der Reformationszeit*, Schriften des Vereins für Reformationsgeschichte. 67.2 and 68.179 (Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1961), 61; Georg Spalatin, *Annales Reformationis oder Jahr-Bücher von der Reformation Lutheri: Aus dessen Autographo ans Licht gestellt von Ernst Salomon Cyprian* (Leipzig: Gleditsch & Weidmann, 1718), 666.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen: Geschehen zur Neunburg, Anno 1542, 20 Ianuarij* (Wittenberg: Schirlentz, 1542); Martin Luther, “Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen. Geschehen zu Naumburg Anno 1542, 20. Januar,” in WA 53:231–60.

Additionally, the ordination of a Lutheran bishop deviated significantly from the Catholic rite, raising questions about its justification, purpose, and implications.

This article examines Luther's mature understanding of the episcopal ordination, episcopal authority, and apostolic succession, as reflected in his *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischoff zu weihen* and his correspondence from 1541 to 1542.<sup>4</sup> To reconstruct the historical context, I will also draw on relevant secondary sources.

## 2. The Historical Background

The ordination of Nicolaus von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg was not an isolated religious event but the culmination of complex political and ecclesiastical struggles. By the early sixteenth century, the Reformation had gained significant traction in various German territories, including Naumburg, where tensions between Protestant-leaning citizens and the Catholic cathedral chapter intensified. These conflicts were further complicated by the influence of the Saxon electors, who sought to assert their authority over episcopal appointments.

This section examines the historical context leading to Amsdorf's ordination. First, it explores the ongoing Protestant-Catholic power struggles in Naumburg before 1541, highlighting the interplay between local governance and religious allegiance. Next, it considers the critical year of indecision (1541–1542), during which both sides maneuvered for control over the bishopric following the death of Philip of the Palatinate. Finally, it analyzes the ordination itself and Amsdorf's subsequent episcopal activities, shedding light on his role in advancing the Reformation within the diocese.

### 2.1. Protestant-Catholic Struggles in Naumburg (Pre-January 1541)

In 1503, Frederick III of Saxony (1463–1525), known as Frederick the Wise, assisted the Naumburg town council in a border dispute. His intervention secured him considerable influence over the town's governance and created a degree of dependence on Saxon electoral authority.<sup>5</sup> Although the bishop

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Wette, ed., *Dr. Martin Luthers Briefe, Sendschreiben und Bedenken* (Berlin: Reimer, 1828), 5:326–525.

<sup>5</sup> Ernst-Otto Reichert and Hans-Otto Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim: Kommentierte Quellenedition mit ausführlicher historischer Einleitung*, Leucoreastudien zur Geschichte

of Naumburg-Zeitz retained formal jurisdiction over his territories, the region increasingly came under the protection of the Saxon electors.<sup>6</sup>

As the Reformation gained traction among Naumburg's citizens, tensions grew between the Protestant-leaning town council and the staunchly Catholic cathedral chapter.<sup>7</sup> In 1517, Philip of the Palatinate, prince-bishop of Freising in Bavaria, was appointed bishop of Naumburg. Initially open to Luther's teachings, Philip ultimately aligned himself with the Catholic camp after 1526. Thereafter, he ceased visiting Naumburg, choosing instead to reside in Freising, leaving the administration of the diocese to the government endowment in Zeitz. Weary of governing, he sought to secure a successor for the bishopric of Naumburg.<sup>8</sup>

Disputes arose between the town council and the cathedral chapter over voting rights in episcopal elections. In an effort to resolve the conflict, Philip required the council to pledge acceptance of the chapter's decision in any future episcopal succession. As a result, from 1526 onward, the town was obligated to recognize the authority of both the bishop and the chapter.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the chapter, supported by segments of the nobility, attempted to curb Lutheran influence by expelling Protestant ministers from the town.

Frederick III's younger brother and successor, John of Saxony (1468–1532), opposed these measures, warning of potential repercussions. To counter Catholic resistance, he appointed Nicolaus Medler, a University of Wittenberg graduate, as superintendent.<sup>10</sup> By 1541, Medler had become the leading spiritual figure in Naumburg.<sup>11</sup> After John's death, his son, John

der Reformation und der Lutherischen Orthodoxie 14 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 68; Hans Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf: Sein Leben bis zu seiner Einweisung als Bischof in Naumburg (1483–1542)* (Zeulenroda: Sporn, 1937), 135.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf, Knight of God and Exile of Christ: Piety and Polemic in the Wake of Luther" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1973), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 112; Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Heinz Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg: Die Diözese*, Germania Sacra, Neue Folge, Die Bistümer der Kirchenprovinz Magdeburg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 35.1:203.

<sup>8</sup> Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35.1:202, 203; Heinz Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg: Die Diözese*, Germania Sacra, Neue Folge, Die Bistümer der Kirchenprovinz Magdeburg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), 35.2:951–59; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35.1:202–3; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 135–36.

<sup>10</sup> Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35.1:203.

<sup>11</sup> Ernst Hoffmann, *Naumburg im Zeitalter der Reformation: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Stadt und des Bistums* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1901), 54–95; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 112; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 136.

Frederick I (1503–1554), continued to support the Protestant cause, assuring the town of his protection.

In response to the Protestant advances, Philip sought the intervention of Emperor Charles V (1500–1558) and obtained a decree from the Imperial Chamber Court. However, the ruling failed to solve the tensions in Naumburg.<sup>12</sup> In 1538, John Frederick I demanded that the cathedral chapter pledge not to elect a new bishop without his approval. The following year, a settlement was reached between the elector and the bishop, though it neither resolved the religious dispute nor established binding commitments to the elector's authority.<sup>13</sup>

## 2.2. The Year of Indecision (January 1541–January 1542)

The anticipated moment arrived when Philip of the Palatinate passed away on January 6, 1541, leaving the bishopric of Naumburg vacant.<sup>14</sup> The cathedral chapter received news of his death ten days later and acted swiftly, convening to elect a successor before Elector John Frederick I could intervene. On January 20, the chapter selected Julius von Pflug, a member of an esteemed Saxon noble family. However, to prevent the elector from exercising his veto power, they kept the election secret.<sup>15</sup>

In choosing Pflug, the chapter had appointed what Robert Kolb has called "one of the most accomplished reform-minded members of the papal

<sup>12</sup> Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35/1:203; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 112; Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 136.

<sup>14</sup> Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church, 1532–1546* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 3:300–301; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 135–36. For further details on the year without a bishop in Naumburg, see Hans-Ulrich Delius, "Das bischofslose Jahr: Das Bistum Naumburg-Zeit im Jahr vor der Einsetzung Nikolaus von Amsdorfs durch Luther," in *Herbergen der Christenheit, 1973/1974: Jahrbuch für deutsche Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Karlheinz Blaschke (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1975), 65–95.

<sup>15</sup> Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35/1:203; Robert Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565): Popular Polemics in the Preservation of Luther's Legacy*, *Bibliotheca Humanistica & Reformatorica*, vol. 24 (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1978), 57; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 112; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 136–37. Kirchner mistakenly referred to Nikolaus von Amsdorf as Georg Pflug. See Hubert Kirchner, *Reformationsgeschichte von 1532–1555/1566: Festigung der Reformation, Calvin, katholische Reform und Konzil von Trient*, *Kirchengeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1987), 2/6:34.

camp in Germany.” While Pflug sought to reconcile the opposing religious factions, he also remained committed to improving the Catholic Church’s standing in the German lands. As provost of Zeitz, he had actively resisted the introduction of the Reformation. When John Frederick I learned of the election, he immediately consulted his advisors on how to assert control over Naumburg. For the elector, Pflug—an “able and attractive” representative of the papal party—was an unacceptable candidate whose appointment he could not tolerate in his domain.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his election, Pflug hesitated for nearly a year before accepting the office in January 1542. In the interim, he successfully petitioned Emperor Charles V to issue a mandate forbidding interference in the affairs of the Naumburg bishopric.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, John Frederick I proceeded with his own plans to take control of the episcopal lands. He disregarded warnings from both the Wittenberg theologians and lay counselors, who urged him to respect the imperial mandate and refrain from using force, “even if a Romanist assumed the bishopric.”<sup>18</sup> The elector, however, was resolute. Determined to prevent a Catholic bishop from ruling Naumburg,<sup>19</sup> he pointed to precedents set by the rulers of Denmark, England, Prussia, and Sweden, who had installed their own candidates in similar situations.

By October 1541, John Frederick I concluded that securing a Lutheran bishop was the best course of action. Seeking theological justification and procedural guidance, he turned to the Wittenberg theologians, who recommended George III (1507–1553), prince of Anhalt-Dessau and provost of the Magdeburg cathedral, as a suitable candidate. They also insisted on specific conditions for the appointment. However, John Frederick I had apparently already considered Nicolaus von Amsdorf, as their first memorandum explicitly noted that Amsdorf would likely refuse the position.<sup>20</sup>

Amsdorf’s sudden rise in the elector’s favor is particularly striking, as

<sup>16</sup> Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf,” 112; Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 35.1:203; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 136.

<sup>17</sup> Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf,” 112–13; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 137; Kirchner, *Reformationsgeschichte von 1532–1555/1566*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf,” 112–13; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 137.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg: Eine Untersuchung zur Gestalt des evangelischen Bischofsamtes in der Reformationszeit*, Schriften des Vereins zur Reformationsgeschichte 179 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1961), 16–21; Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf,” 112.

<sup>20</sup> Kolb, “Nikolaus von Amsdorf,” 113; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 137–38; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg*, 21–45.

he had not been closely associated with John Frederick I before his nomination.<sup>21</sup> To understand why he ultimately emerged as the preferred candidate, it is necessary to examine his background and the circumstances that brought him to the elector's attention.<sup>22</sup>

Amsdorf had served in Magdeburg for eighteen years (1524–1542), transforming it into a bastion of Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>23</sup> However, his prominence grew significantly in the wake of the Colloquy of Regensburg (April 5 – May 22, 1541).<sup>24</sup> At the colloquy, he aligned himself with the protesting imperial estates and accused Philipp Melancthon of wavering in his convictions—of being too willing to compromise and overstepping what Amsdorf regarded as an uncrossable theological boundary. He expressed

<sup>21</sup> Volker Leppin, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf und Johann Friedrich d. Ä.," in *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565): Zwischen Reformation und Politik*, Leucorea-Studien zur Geschichte der Reformation und der Lutherischen Orthodoxie 9, ed. Irene Dingel, Johannes Hund, and Henning P. Jürgens (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008), 103; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 138.

<sup>22</sup> For further information on Amsdorf's life and accomplishments, see Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf;" Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz, "Amsdorf, Nikolaus von," in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Bautz (Hamm: Bautz, 1975), 1:152–54; Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565)*; David C. Steinmetz, *Reformers in the Wings: From Geiler von Kaysersberg to Theodore Beza*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 70–75; Irene Dingel, Johannes Hund, and Henning P. Jürgens, eds., *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565): Zwischen Reformation und Politik*, Leucorea-Studien zur Geschichte der Reformation und der Lutherischen Orthodoxie 9 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 52–133; Karl Brinkel, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf: Als verjagter Bischof im Thüringer Land," in *Des Herren Name steht uns bei: Luthers Freunde und Schüler in Thüringen*, ed. Karl Brinkel and Herbert Hintzenstern (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1961), 1:80; Robert Kolb, "Kollege und Schüler: Nikolaus von Amsdorffs Einsatz für die Theologie Martin Luthers auf dem Hintergrund des Wittenberger biblischen Humanismus," *Lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 22, no. 3/4 (1998): 137–50; Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 62–68.

<sup>24</sup> This colloquy continued the Colloquy of Worms (November 25, 1540 – January 17, 1541) and aimed to negotiate all 23 articles of the *Wormser Buch*. After both sides (German and Swiss Reformers and Roman Catholics) successfully reached agreements on the first four articles, they initially appeared to achieve a breakthrough on Article 5 (doctrine of justification) with the *duplex iustitia* compromise formula. However, upon closer examination, the wording proved ambiguous, leading both Catholic and Protestant factions to ultimately reject it. Despite these efforts, the remaining theological divisions proved insurmountable. Disagreements over Article 14 (the doctrine of transubstantiation), along with disputes regarding the magisterium and the role of confession, prevented any meaningful resolution.

his dismay in a strongly worded letter to John Frederick I, warning that Melanchthon was in a precarious spiritual state and implying that he, Amsdorf, represented the true Lutheran faith.<sup>25</sup> This steadfastness won him the elector's trust and increased his political standing.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this, the Wittenberg theologians attempted to dissuade John Frederick I from considering Amsdorf for the episcopacy. In one memorandum, Melanchthon cautioned against selecting a candidate who was "proud and quarrelsome," likely referring to Amsdorf.<sup>27</sup> Both Amsdorf himself and the Magdeburg city council pleaded with the elector not to remove him from his post, but John Frederick I refused to listen. In his view, Amsdorf met all the qualifications of a bishop as "a noble, unmarried, learned, and pious man."<sup>28</sup>

### 2.3. The Ordination of the Lutheran Bishop at Naumburg and His Episcopal Activities

On January 17, 1542, after nearly a year of hesitation, Julius von Pflug formally accepted the episcopal office and was proclaimed bishop by the cathedral chapter. However, the following day, Elector John Frederick I entered Naumburg accompanied by Nicolaus von Amsdorf, Martin Luther, and several associates. In a gathering of council members, citizens, and select representatives of the nobility, those present expressed their support for the elector's decision to install Amsdorf as bishop.<sup>29</sup>

The official induction took place on January 20 in Naumburg Cathedral before an estimated five thousand attendees, including numerous clergy, John Frederick I, Duke John Ernest of Saxe-Coburg (1521–1553), Duke Ernest I of Braunschweig-Lüneburg (1497–1546), Philipp Melanchthon, Caelius

<sup>25</sup> Leppin, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf und Johann Friedrich d. Ä.," 104–5; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 138–39. For further details on the conflict regarding Melanchthon's perceived willingness to compromise and Amsdorf's opposition, see Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565)*, 49–56.

<sup>26</sup> Leppin, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf und Johann Friedrich d. Ä.," 103. Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565)*, 15–24, noted that while Amsdorf was not suited to inherit Luther's mantle, he played a crucial role in transforming Luther's theology and movement into a fixed system of Orthodoxy. See also Kolb, "Kollege und Schüler," 137–50.

<sup>27</sup> Philip Melanchthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, Corpus Reformatorum 4, ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil (Halle: Schwetschke, 1837), 4:698. See also Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 139; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 113.

<sup>28</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 113; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 45–51.

<sup>29</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 114; Kolb, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf (1483–1565)*, 57–58; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 51–60.

Secundus Curio (1503–1569), George Spalatin (1484–1545), and other scholars.<sup>30</sup> Although a more detailed analysis of the ordination service will be provided later, some aspects merit brief mention here. Luther preached the sermon,<sup>31</sup> and assisted by Spalatin, Nicolaus Medler, and others, conducted Amsdorf's ordination. He then outlined Amsdorf's pastoral responsibilities, which included caring for the people of the bishopric, preaching and teaching the pure gospel, properly administering the sacraments, and overseeing ecclesiastical affairs in Naumburg. Following the elector's insistence, Amsdorf was formally enthroned. Reichert and Schneider note, "The next day he received the homage of the city and then rode off to the episcopal residence in Zeitz."<sup>32</sup> Although he was not the first Protestant bishop in a broader sense, Amsdorf was the first individual in the German lands to be ordained explicitly as a Lutheran bishop.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Adolf Wispel, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Stadt Naumburg a. S. nebst einem Anhang: Abriss der Geschichte von Freyburg a. A., Goseck, Schönburg, Saaleck und Rudelsburg* (Naumburg an der Saale: Schirmer, 1903), 68–69; Ralph F. Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites in the Early Reformation Church*, Renaissance and Baroque Studies and Texts 15 (New York: Lang, 1996), 153; Kirchner, *Reformationsgeschichte von 1532–1555/1566*, 34, 40; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> Wispel, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Stadt Naumburg*, 69, mistakenly claimed that Medler, the superintendent of Naumburg, preached the sermon. Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 143, stated that Medler gave a speech on 1 Timothy 3, which likely refers to the reading of that passage. However, the use of the term "speech" suggests that Medler may have also provided some elaboration on the text.

<sup>32</sup> Sixtus Braun, *Naumburger Annalen vom Jahre 799–1613: Handschriften im Städtischen Archiv zu Naumburg an der Saale*, 2nd ed. (Naumburg an der Saale: Sieling, 1927), 249–64; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 114; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg*, 60–78.

<sup>33</sup> Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*, 68; Wießner, *Das Bistum Naumburg*, 203. George of Polentz was ordained as bishop of Samland in Prussia in 1519 and also served as bishop of Pomesania from 1521 to 1523. However, he converted to Lutheranism only in 1523, making him the first Lutheran bishop. He remained bishop of Samland until 1550. See Paul Tschackert, "Georg von Polentz, Bischof von Samland: Ein Charakterbild," in *Kirchengeschichtliche Studien, Hermann Reuter zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet*, ed. Theodor Brieger et al. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1888), 145–94; Carl Alfred von Hase, "Polentz: Georg v. P.," in *Allgemeine deutsche Biographie: Philipp (III) von Hessen - Pyrker* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1888), 26, 382–85. Von Polentz's successor as bishop of Pomesania was Erhard of Queis, whose election was never confirmed by the pope. Nevertheless, he served as a Lutheran bishop from 1523 to 1525. See Johannes Voigt, *Geschichte Preussens, von den ältesten Zeiten bis zum Untergange der Herrschaft des Deutschen Ordens*, vol. 9 (Königsberg: Gebrüder Vornträger, 1839), 694–96. Gissur Einarsson served as Lutheran bishop of Iceland from 1540 to 1548, though he was not formally ordained as bishop until the fall of 1542. See J. Hafst, "Við helgan kross í

Although this article does not examine Amsdorf's tenure as bishop in detail, a few observations on his episcopal administration are warranted. The fragmentary nature of Amsdorf's surviving writings—both published and unpublished—makes it difficult to reconstruct his activities comprehensively.<sup>34</sup> His relationship with the elector was primarily official and partly public, encompassing three key roles: theological advisor,<sup>35</sup> instrument

Kaldaðarnesi," *Tíminn Sunnudagsblað*, February 28, 1965, 180–83, 186. Hans Tausen was appointed bishop of Ribe in 1542, an office he held until his death in 1561. See Rasmus H. C. Dreyer, "Hans Tausen: Forskning, Historie, Teologi" (PhD diss., Københavns Universitet, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Felix G. Rosenfeld, "Beiträge zur Geschichte des Naumburger Bischofsstreites," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 29 (1899): 155–78; Hans-Ulrich Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)" (PhD diss., Universität Leipzig, 1968); Hans-Ulrich Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 96 (1971): 153–55; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 112. See also WA Br 12:314–21. For example, while 42 letters from Luther to Amsdorf survive from the period between January 1542 and Luther's death in 1546 (WA Br 9–11), none of Amsdorf's letters to Luther from that time are extant. See Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 118.

<sup>35</sup> Amsdorf was asked by the elector to evaluate the *Book of Cologne*, a document coauthored by Philipp Melancthon, Martin Bucer, Caspar Hedio, and Johann Pistorius. The book was presented to John Frederick I by Hermann of Wied (1477–1552), Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, who sought his opinion. Intended as a constitutional framework for the reformation of Wied's territories, it was largely in harmony with Lutheran doctrine. See Aemilius Ludwig Richter, *Die evangelische Kirchenordnung des 16. Jahrhunderts: Urkunden und Regesten zur Geschichte des Rechts und Verfassung der evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, 2 vols. (Weimar: Verlag des Landes-Industriecomptoirs, 1846), 2:30–54; Philip Melancthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, Corpus Reformatorum 5, ed. C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil (Halle: Schwetschke, 1838), 5:461; Conrad Varrentrapp, *Hermann von Wied und sein Reformationsversuch in Köln* (Leipzig: Dunckler and Humblot, 1878), 229–30; Clyde L. Manschreck, *Melancthon: The Quiet Reformer* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 242–45; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 119. Although Amsdorf acknowledged the book's general alignment with Lutheran doctrine, he identified several problematic aspects, including its treatment of free will, the idea that grace could be lost by acting against conscience, the absence of criticism of the pope, the lack of a clear affirmation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, the omission of any attack on radical reformers, and the failure to recognize Luther as the great reformer of Wittenberg. Luther largely agreed with Amsdorf's concerns but appeared to diverge on three points: free will, the possibility of falling from grace, and the emphasis on Luther's own role in the Reformation—highlighting ongoing tensions between Amsdorf and Melancthon. See Melancthon, *Opera quae supersunt omnia*, 5:459, 462; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 435, 440;

of the elector's ecclesiastical policy, and, ultimately, chaplain to John Frederick I.<sup>36</sup>

Amsdorf sought to advance the Reformation by influencing the selection and ordination of pastors within his diocese.<sup>37</sup> Although the elector placed the secular administration of the bishopric in the hands of a *Stiftshauptmann* (governor of the diocese) in Zeitz,<sup>38</sup> Amsdorf appears to have played a role in certain temporal matters as well.<sup>39</sup> Electoral officials implemented his directives regarding church affairs,<sup>40</sup> and while he preached regularly in Zeitz, little documentation exists regarding his broader preaching activities.<sup>41</sup> In

WA Br 10:614–18; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 119. See also Otto Lerche, *Amsdorff und Melanchthon: Eine kirchengeschichtliche Studie* (Berlin: Author, 1937); Kirchner, *Reformationsgeschichte von 1532–1555/1566*, 2/6:93; Rudolph W. Heinze, *Reform and Conflict: From the Medieval World to the Wars of Religion, A.D., 1350–1648*, Baker History of the Church 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 339–41; Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300–1700)*, The Christian Tradition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 4:144; Reichert and Schneider, *Amsdorff und das Interim*. For Amsdorf's theological views, see Otto Henning Nebe, *Reine Lehre: Zur Theologie des Niklas von Amsdorff* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1935).

<sup>36</sup> Leppin, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf und Johann Friedrich d. Ä.," 103.

<sup>37</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 116; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg*, 104–15; Gehrt, "Der 'Erzbischof' von Thüringen?," 227–28. Since Delius did not paginate the main body of his dissertation, the numbers provided refer to the respective letters rather than page numbers. See Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 8, 12, 132, 562, 573, 582, 587, 697–98.

<sup>38</sup> Kirchner, *Reformationsgeschichte von 1532–1555/1566*, 34; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 137–38. Although the elector had appointed the administrator Melchior von Creutzen to assist in secular matters, "Creutzen ruled so arbitrarily and tyrannically" that even Lutheran noblemen and Superintendent Medler came to resent having a Lutheran bishop, "complaining that they would rather live under a papal bishop." In response to these grievances, John Frederick I intervened in 1544, relieving Amsdorf of this burden by removing Creutzen from his position. See Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 117–18; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 84–95, 107–9, 118–26, 139–41; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 84, 151, 169, 258, 264, 269, 307, 314, 330, 351, 396, 411, 455, 522, 649, 653–54.

<sup>39</sup> Wispel, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Stadt Naumburg*, 68–69; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 115.

<sup>40</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 115–16; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg*, 101–03; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 534–35, 557, 719.

<sup>41</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 116. See remarks in Nikolaus von Amsdorf, *Ein kurtzer Unterricht auff Georgen Maiors Antwort, das er nit unschuldig sey, wie er sich tragice*

addition to his pastoral duties, he exercised episcopal jurisdiction over his flock, adjudicating cases related to marriage and other ecclesiastical matters.<sup>42</sup> In more complex situations, he frequently sought counsel from the Wittenberg theologians and consulted the elector on both major and minor issues.<sup>43</sup>

Amsdorf emphasized the importance of visitations as a means of addressing Catholic strongholds and providing pastoral care to Protestant communities. However, the elector refused to allocate sufficient funds for these efforts, suggesting that John Frederick I was content merely to have a non-papal bishop in his domain and saw no pressing need to strengthen Amsdorf's authority. It was not until 1545, in Amsdorf's final year as bishop, that the elector assigned two individuals to assist in visitations. Their efforts were met with greater success in rural parishes than in staunchly Catholic areas.<sup>44</sup>

In the church constitution that Amsdorf drafted for these visitations, he underscored the necessity for pastors to "preach Christian doctrine according to the Scripture, teach the catechism, and administer the sacraments according to Christ's institution." The document outlined a structure for church life that loosely followed the Decalogue and included a prescribed list of books that each parish was expected to possess.<sup>45</sup>

*rhümet: Das gute Werck zur Seligkeit nit von Nöten sind: Das gute Werck zu eim Christlichen Leben hie auff Erden nötig sind* (Basel: n.p., 1552).

<sup>42</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf" 116; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 112, 123, 134, 144, 171–72, 231, 323, 452, 691.

<sup>43</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 116; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 115–30; Jürgen Diestelmann, "Der Fall Besserer," *Lutherische Blätter*, no. 84 (1965): 57–72; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 16, 17, 174, 232, 243, 363, 439, 582, 607, 729, 741, 751, 754, 758–59, 763, 781.

<sup>44</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 116–17; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 142–45; Emil Sehling, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen des 16. Jahrhunderts*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Eisland, 1902–1904), 1:57; Delius, "Der Briefwechsel des Nikolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof von Naumburg-Zeitz (1542–1546)," nos. 494, 502, 504, 507, 509, 512–13, 516. As early as March 1543, Amsdorf informally resigned from his position, but the elector refused to accept his decision. See Otto Albrecht, "Mitteilungen aus den Akten der Naumburger Reformationsgeschichte," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 77 (1904): 75–79; Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 117.

<sup>45</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 116–17. Among the books was, of course, the Bible, but also works such as Luther's *Postil*, his catechisms, the Schmalkaldic Articles, Melancthon's *Loci communes*, and others. Notably, Amsdorf regarded the *Loci communes* as useful for pastors, despite his general tendency to find fault with nearly everything Melancthon produced. See Sehling, *Die evangelischen Kirchenordnungen*, 1:90–91;

### 3. An Analysis of Luther's *Exempel*

The ordination of Nicolaus von Amsdorf as bishop of Naumburg was an unprecedented event that required theological justification. Martin Luther provided such a defense in his 1542 pamphlet, *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischof zu weihen* ("An Example of Consecrating a True Christian Bishop"). This document served not only as an explanation of the ordination but also as a forceful polemic against the papal hierarchy and a broader statement on episcopal authority within the Reformation.

Luther's *Exempel* is characterized by his distinct rhetorical style, which blends sarcasm, irony, and sharp theological critique. His arguments center on three key themes: first, the justification of Amsdorf's ordination as a legitimate ecclesiastical act; second, a redefinition of episcopal authority in contrast to Catholic doctrine; and third, an assertion of the Protestant right to reject the authority of the papal church. This section will analyze these aspects, beginning with an examination of Luther's style and tone, followed by his remarks on episcopal ordination, and concluding with his defense of the legitimacy of Amsdorf's appointment at Naumburg.

#### 3.1. Luther's Style and Tone

Luther's *Exempel* is characterized by a sharp, sarcastic, and almost cynical style, a hallmark of his polemical writings against his opponents. From the outset, the tone is deliberately provocative. The opening argument can be summarized as follows:<sup>46</sup> *We poor heretics have once again committed a great and terrible sin against the hellish church and its most hellish father by consecrating a bishop. We joyfully confess this sin, but before you consider granting us forgiveness, we must remind you that we lack the necessary prerequisite for absolution—repentance.* His opening argument sets the stage for a rhetorical contrast between the Lutheran and papal factions. Luther mockingly refers to his own party as "we poor heretics,"<sup>47</sup> "apostate papist,"<sup>48</sup> and the "true sheep,"<sup>49</sup> while he labels the opposing side as a "hellish unchristian

Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 117.

<sup>46</sup> WA 53:231.

<sup>47</sup> WA 53:231, 256.

<sup>48</sup> WA 53:233.

<sup>49</sup> WA 53:234–35, 247.

church,"<sup>50</sup> led by "the most hellish father,"<sup>51</sup> a "stranger,"<sup>52</sup> a "wolf,"<sup>53</sup> and even a "devil"<sup>54</sup> who governs through "arbitrary devilish decretals and blasted bulls."<sup>55</sup>

Luther's dialogical style can easily be perceived as mocking. He was aware of such accusations and responded preemptively, claiming that he would refrain from mocking—unless, of course, the Holy Spirit compelled him to do so through his pen.<sup>56</sup> This ironic remark reinforces his rhetorical strategy of turning criticism back on his opponents.

Beyond its sarcasm and cynicism, the *Exempel* is marked by strong apologetic, polemical, and aggressively combative overtones. Luther does not merely defend the ordination of Amsdorf; he actively attacks the legitimacy of the papal hierarchy, portraying its leaders as both spiritually corrupt and doctrinally illegitimate. His language is not only satirical but also deeply confrontational, reflecting his broader campaign to dismantle traditional Catholic structures and assert the theological and ecclesiastical independence of the Reformation movement.

### 3.2. Remarks on Episcopal Ordination

In traditional Catholic terminology, the term *Ordination* ("ordination") was typically used for the ordination of priests, whereas the term *Weihe* ("consecration") was reserved exclusively for the consecration of bishops. However, in the context of Amsdorf's episcopal ordination, Luther used the two terms interchangeably.<sup>57</sup> While he later employed the verb *weihen* and its derivatives consistently,<sup>58</sup> his initial use of both terms reflects his broader theological understanding: episcopal consecration was, in essence, merely another form of ordination.<sup>59</sup> For Luther, the primary act of the *Weihe* was

<sup>50</sup> WA 53:231.

<sup>51</sup> WA 53:231–52.

<sup>52</sup> WA 53:234–35.

<sup>53</sup> WA 53:234–35, 240–42, 246–47.

<sup>54</sup> WA 53:235, 237, 241–42, 250, 252.

<sup>55</sup> WA 53:237.

<sup>56</sup> WA 53:232.

<sup>57</sup> WA 53:231–32; cf. Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 157–58. In his letter to Jacob Probst, dated March 26, 1542, Luther referred to the event using the participle *ordinatum* ("having ordained"). See WA Br 10 no. 3728, 23.

<sup>58</sup> WA 53:231, 256–57.

<sup>59</sup> WA 53:231.

the laying on of hands,<sup>60</sup> a practice he viewed as central to both priestly and episcopal ordination. The similarities between these two rites will be examined in more detail below.

Amsdorf's ordination was deliberately set apart from the traditional Catholic episcopal consecration, serving as an example of a distinctly Protestant approach. Luther sought to emphasize this distinction explicitly, stating that the rite occurred "without all chrism, also without butter, lard, bacon, tar, kidney fat, frankincense, coals, and what is more of the same holiness."<sup>61</sup> By stripping away these ritual elements, he underscored his rejection of sacramentalism in episcopal ordination. For Luther, the essential requirement was the mutual agreement between the church and the bishop: the congregation had to accept the candidate, the bishop had to commit to teaching the church, and the church had to be willing to receive his preaching. The laying on of hands and the accompanying blessing served only to confirm and bear witness to this agreement.

Luther further argued that the identity of the person performing the ordination was ultimately inconsequential, stating that whether the act was carried out by "a pastor, an angel, or the devil" was of secondary importance. His reasoning bears some resemblance to the *ex opere operato* principle, which maintains that the efficacy of a sacrament is independent of the moral state of the officiant. However, Luther departed from the Catholic understanding by asserting that the act itself was not sacramental but merely a public expression of the mutual commitment between the bishop and his church.<sup>62</sup>

Despite rejecting many traditional Catholic practices, Luther still adhered to certain ancient customs, particularly the practice of consecrating a new bishop with the assistance of bishops from neighboring towns. The theological and historical rationale behind this preference will be discussed further below.<sup>63</sup>

Finally, Luther rooted his understanding of episcopal qualifications in Scripture, particularly Tit 1:7–9 and 1 Tim 3:2. These passages emphasize

<sup>60</sup> WA 53:256; cf. Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 157; Hellmut Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination bei Luther und Melanchthon*, *Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Dogmengeschichte* 11 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 213–15.

<sup>61</sup> WA 53:231.

<sup>62</sup> WA 53:257.

<sup>63</sup> WA 53:257.

the character and moral integrity of the bishop,<sup>64</sup> rather than any sacramental authority conferred through apostolic succession. According to Luther, a bishop must be holy, possess a faithful and honest heart, and lead an honorable life.<sup>65</sup> His responsibilities included preaching the gospel, administering baptism, binding and losing sins, and offering spiritual guidance to his congregation.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the *Exempel*, Luther applied these scriptural criteria to justify Amsdorf's appointment while simultaneously rejecting the papal candidate for the office.

### 3.3. Legitimization of the Episcopal Ordination at Naumburg

Luther's *Exempel* can be divided into five main sections: first, the introduction; second, the response to the first question; third, the response to the second question; fourth, the response to the third question; and fifth, the conclusion. Since the introduction has already been examined in the preceding sections, this analysis will focus on the remaining four parts of the document.

At the core of the *Exempel* is Luther's justification for the ordination of a Lutheran bishop in Naumburg, which he presented through his responses to three critical questions. First, he addressed whether the Lutheran party had the right to reject the cathedral chapter's election of Julius von Pflug and install its own candidate. Second, he considered whether the election of an alternative bishop constituted a violation of an oath of allegiance. Third, he responded to concerns regarding the appropriateness of a Lutheran ordination conducted by those the Catholic Church regarded as heretics. These responses collectively form Luther's theological and legal defense of Amsdorf's episcopal consecration.

The following subsections will examine each of these arguments in turn, highlighting Luther's biblical, historical, and experiential justifications for the legitimacy of the Naumburg ordination.

#### 3.3.1. *The Right of Rejecting the Chapter's Election of Pflug*

The first question Luther addressed in the *Exempel* was whether the Lutheran party had the legal right to reject the cathedral chapter's election of

<sup>64</sup> WA 53:253–58.

<sup>65</sup> WA 53:253–58.

<sup>66</sup> WA 53:253.

Julius von Pflug and appoint their own candidate as bishop. While acknowledging that legal scholars might debate the legitimacy of this decision, Luther admitted his own lack of expertise in legal matters. Instead, he based his arguments on what he considered a firmer foundation—biblical and spiritual authority.<sup>67</sup>

**Biblical Arguments.** Luther justified his rejection of the papal party's episcopal authority by appealing to several biblical passages, including Exod 20:3, 7–8 and Matt 7:15.<sup>68</sup> The commands to have no other gods (Exod 20:3), to refrain from using God's name in vain (20:7), and to keep the Sabbath holy (20:8) demonstrated, in Luther's view, that God alone must be preached and heard. These verses, he argued, condemned false gods, false worship, the misuse of God's name, and the perversion of His Word.<sup>69</sup>

Expanding on this, Luther interpreted Exod 20:3 and Matt 7:15 to mean that any "prophet, minister, or bishop" who promotes false teachings, such as honoring other gods, must neither preach nor be listened to.<sup>70</sup> Those who lead people away from God must be removed from episcopal office and bishopric—not by papal or imperial authority but by divine command.<sup>71</sup> According to Luther, such individuals are not true bishops but rather "wolves" and "devils" in disguise.<sup>72</sup>

Luther also cited John 10:5, 27, emphasizing that true believers—Christ's "sheep"—will not listen to the voice of a stranger but will flee from false teachers. On this basis, he argued that Christians not only had the right but the obligation to depose "wolf bishops," refuse them obedience, and replace them with true shepherds of the church.<sup>73</sup>

Further support for this position came from Hos 4:6, which Luther paraphrased as follows: "If you do not want to preach of me and spread my word, I do not want to be your God and you shall not be my priest or bishop." He concluded that such figures were, in reality, not God's bishops

<sup>67</sup> WA 53:232–33.

<sup>68</sup> WA 53:233.

<sup>69</sup> Luther emphasized that the day of rest holds no intrinsic value over other weekdays; its significance lies solely in providing uninterrupted time for hearing God's Word. See Denis Kaiser, "He Spake and It Was Done: Luther's Creation Theology in His 1535 Lectures on Gen 1:1–2:4," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 24.2 (2013): 128, 135.

<sup>70</sup> WA 53:233.

<sup>71</sup> WA 53:233–34.

<sup>72</sup> WA 53:234.

<sup>73</sup> WA 53:234–35.

but the devil's. Thus, Luther maintained that God Himself rejected and forbade the recognition of these false bishops or preachers within His church.<sup>74</sup>

**Experiential Arguments.** Luther supported his argument by pointing to historical examples that, in his view, demonstrated the corruption and tyranny of the papal party. He asserted that the pope and his followers had not only expelled but also strangled, hanged, burned, and killed true believers.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, they had commanded others to do the same—persecuting, cursing, and even condemning souls to what they claimed was eternal damnation. As a particularly egregious example, Luther cited the execution of the holy and righteous bishop Jan Hus of Prague, along with “many of our people” who suffered similar fates.<sup>76</sup>

Beyond these acts of persecution, Luther accused the Catholic hierarchy of unlawfully interfering in secular affairs—the *weltlich und häuslich Regiment* (“worldly and domestic order”)—a sphere in which, he argued, God had not granted them any authority.<sup>77</sup> He denounced the pope for deposing emperors, kings, and princes, dissolving marriages, and annulling oaths and duties, not because of heresy, but simply due to disobedience to his “arbitrary devilish decretals and blasted bulls.”

Luther contrasted this papal overreach with the example of God's true messengers—His apostles and prophets. While they had indeed condemned false teachers, heretics, and corrupt bishops, they had never sought to interfere in worldly governance. They allowed kings to remain kings, marriages to remain intact, and estates to remain undisturbed. Unlike the pope, they did not seek control over people's bodies, lives, property, or honor.<sup>78</sup> Instead, those who refused to heed God's Word were simply expelled from His kingdom, while those who followed such false leaders, or failed to flee from them, faced condemnation.<sup>79</sup>

Yet, Luther observed, the pope and his church regularly deposed bishops and cathedral chapters they deemed heretical. If the pope claimed the right to remove those who opposed him, why, Luther asked, was the true, eternal God expected to tolerate in His own church those who openly

<sup>74</sup> WA 53:235.

<sup>75</sup> WA 53:235.

<sup>76</sup> WA 53:236.

<sup>77</sup> WA 53:236–37.

<sup>78</sup> WA 53:237.

<sup>79</sup> WA 53:236.

mocked His majesty, misled His people, destroyed His kingdom, and replaced Him with the devil?<sup>80</sup>

**Situation in Naumburg.** Luther repeatedly applied his theological arguments to the concrete circumstances in Naumburg, asserting that the cathedral chapter had no interest in preaching God’s Word but instead actively resisted and persecuted it out of sheer obstinacy.<sup>81</sup> Their opposition was so severe that the people of Naumburg, Zeitz, and other estates within the diocese felt compelled to seek the protection of the Elector of Saxony. It was only under his support that they were able to embrace the gospel against the will of the cathedral chapter.<sup>82</sup>

Despite this, the Naumburg chapter placed its trust in the power of the pope, believing themselves to be untouchable.<sup>83</sup> Luther, however, reminded them that God, who had overthrown many great empires, was more than capable of bringing them down as well.<sup>84</sup> He cited Dan 2:33–34, 40–45, emphasizing that even the mighty Roman Empire—the “iron kingdom”—had ultimately fallen. Since the same God who shattered Rome was still alive, He could just as easily destroy a fleshly pope or even a “paper pope, bishop, and others.”<sup>85</sup>

Luther further argued that the chapter had knowingly defied both the elector and the local church. When they elected their new bishop, the elector had warned them that their chosen candidate was deeply aligned with the papal party. This was something that neither the elector nor the Reformation-supporting citizens of Naumburg could accept. The elector therefore urged the chapter to reconsider and select a candidate who was not bound to the pope. However, they rejected this advice, thus placing themselves in opposition to the church of Naumburg, the estates, and the elector.<sup>86</sup>

Luther’s description of the chapter’s actions is revealing. He accused them of attempting to “install the wolf”—that is, the pope and his allies—“into the sheepfold of Christ at Naumburg” in order to suffocate souls, suppress God’s Word, and wreak havoc upon the diocese. He insisted that this

<sup>80</sup> WA 53:237.

<sup>81</sup> WA 53:237.

<sup>82</sup> WA 53:237–38.

<sup>83</sup> WA 53:238.

<sup>84</sup> WA 53:238–39.

<sup>85</sup> WA 53:239.

<sup>86</sup> WA 53:239–40.

was not an isolated act of defiance but part of a broader pattern of behavior that had persisted for over twenty years.<sup>87</sup>

After secretly electing Pflug, the chapter belatedly informed the elector of their decision. However, they deliberately withheld the identity of their chosen bishop while asking for his protection. Luther saw this as an implicit admission of their weak position.<sup>88</sup> Why, he asked, would a Catholic chapter loyal to the pope seek the protection of a Protestant ruler?

For Luther, this entire episode justified the church of Naumburg's right to reject the chapter's decision and elect another bishop.<sup>89</sup> By turning away from Pflug and the chapter, they were not violating legitimate authority but rather freeing themselves from the influence of the "wolf" and the "devil."<sup>90</sup>

The Elector of Saxony, Luther maintained, had never sought to deprive the chapter of its right to elect a bishop, nor had he initially imposed his own candidate upon them. Instead, the chapter had forfeited its own authority through its actions. Had the chapter elected ten bishops who either could not or would not be true Christian shepherds, Luther argued, the church would have been fully justified in rejecting all of them. He envisioned the church responding with these words: "Dear misters of the chapter, elect whom you want and elect once again. Elect a thousand times, but we care nothing at all about your election. He shall not be our bishop. We cannot and do not want to look at or listen to him, neither do we want to regard you as a chapter until you become a Christian chapter and give us a Christian bishop."<sup>91</sup>

For more than twenty years, Luther contended, the papal party had demonstrated that they were not true Christians, let alone Christian bishops. Instead, they had spent their time prohibiting, condemning, persecuting, and even killing adherents of the true faith. Among their many offenses, Luther cited their prohibition of the sacrament in both kinds, their endorsement of what he called the "great abominable piece of the Mass," their opposition to clerical marriage, and their continued persecution of the church at Naumburg. He then posed a pointed rhetorical question: Had the cathedral chapter ever repented of these misdeeds, corrected them, or sought reform? His answer was clear—they had not. Instead, they had only

<sup>87</sup> WA 53:240.

<sup>88</sup> WA 53:240–41.

<sup>89</sup> WA 53:241.

<sup>90</sup> WA 53:241–42.

<sup>91</sup> WA 53:242.

sought to elect yet another bishop who would perpetuate their “wolfish” actions against the churches.<sup>92</sup>

Lastly, Luther addressed the argument that the pope was beyond human judgment because no one was above him except God. He turned this claim against his opponents, arguing that God was indeed judging the pope—through His holy Word, something even the papal party was forced to acknowledge.<sup>93</sup> The divine judgment was clear: A wolf shall not be a bishop in His Christian church. No decree from the emperor, the pope, kings, or even the devils themselves could compel Christ’s sheep to listen to the voice of a wolf.<sup>94</sup>

### *3.3.2. The Election of the New Bishop—A Break of an Oath of Allegiance*

For Luther, the central issue was whether the church of Naumburg should be condemned for electing a new bishop in opposition to the one chosen by the cathedral chapter.<sup>95</sup> He argued that the papal party was not primarily concerned with ensuring a bishop who would serve the church through the Word of God and the sacraments. Rather, their main objective was to secure an oath of allegiance and enforce obedience, allowing them to govern Naumburg as they saw fit.

Luther responded to this charge by citing Matt 7:15 and John 10:5—warnings to beware of false prophets in sheep’s clothing and to flee from the voice of a stranger. These passages, he contended, illustrated the relationship between Protestant believers (the “sheep”) and the papal authorities (the “strangers” or “wolves”). God Himself, Luther insisted, had judged that “we silly sheep” should not listen to wolves but flee from them.<sup>96</sup>

With characteristic sarcasm, Luther imagined the reaction of someone who had been deceived into pledging an oath to a false shepherd. Upon realizing the deception, the individual would cry out: “Oh, you infamous, rapacious wolf! My oath and favor were not given to you but to my true shepherd. May the devil take you! How did you deceive me, poor sheep, and seek to devour me?”<sup>97</sup>

The real question, Luther argued, was whether one remained bound to

<sup>92</sup> WA 53:243.

<sup>93</sup> WA 53:245.

<sup>94</sup> WA 53:246.

<sup>95</sup> WA 53:246–47.

<sup>96</sup> WA 53:247.

<sup>97</sup> WA 53:247.

an oath that had been secured through deception. The Catholic party insisted that an oath, once given, must always be upheld. However, Luther countered that this was not a matter for legalistic debate. Rather than consulting canon law or ecclesiastical decrees, he insisted that the Protestant party should seek guidance solely from the Word of God.<sup>98</sup>

Mocking the Catholic insistence on the inviolability of oaths, Luther compared their repeated cries of “oath, oath, oath shall be kept” to the braying of a donkey—specifically, the *Bapst Esel* (“pope donkey”). His response to this was simple: “bishop, bishop, give us a bishop.” He argued that without a legitimate bishop, there could be no valid oath, and without a valid oath, there could be no perjury.

Further elaborating on the nature of oaths, Luther emphasized that an oath requires two parties: one who gives the oath and one who receives it. If one party is missing, the oath is void.<sup>99</sup> To reinforce his argument, he pointed to the writings of Catholic theologians and legal scholars, who stated: *In malis promissis non expedit servare fidem* (“In evil promises, it is not advisable to keep faith”), and *In malis promissis rescinde fidem* (“In evil promises, faith should be revoked”).<sup>100</sup> If Catholic scholars themselves recognized that sinful or misguided promises need not be kept, Luther asked, why should Protestants in Naumburg be the only ones bound to uphold an oath that was false and erroneous?

He concluded that if an oath had been made to the devil—who had disguised himself as divine—then the promise was in reality made to God rather than to Satan. In such a case, breaking the oath would not constitute perjury, for the obligation itself was invalid.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the people of Naumburg were fully justified in rejecting the false oath and electing a new bishop in accordance with God’s will.

**Situation in Naumburg.** Luther recalled an event from his time at the University of Erfurt in which a silk embroider posed as a noble count and managed to deceive even esteemed theologians and lawyers, who unwittingly appointed him as the university’s principal. When rumors of his true profession began to spread, the impostor swiftly disappeared.<sup>102</sup> Since the

<sup>98</sup> WA 53:247–48.

<sup>99</sup> WA 53:248.

<sup>100</sup> WA 53:249. These statements come from *Corpus Iuris Canonici, De regulis iuris, Liber Sextus*, book 5, appendix to title 12. They may be translated as: “It is of no use to continue trusting in bad promises” and “Rescind faith in bad promises.”

<sup>101</sup> WA 53:250.

<sup>102</sup> WA 53:250.

students' oath of allegiance had been obtained under false pretenses, Luther argued that they were in fact bound not to the fraud but to the rightful principal.

He used this anecdote as an analogy for the situation in Naumburg, asserting that the estates and the church were obligated to swear allegiance only to a legitimate bishop. If they pledged obedience to a false bishop and later discovered the deception, they were justified in setting aside that commitment and waiting for a true bishop to whom they could make a valid promise. In Luther's view, this meant that the transition in episcopal authority did not constitute a breach of the oath or a disruption of obedience within the diocese. The change in the bishop's identity was not the fault of the people of Naumburg but rather the consequence of the chapter's own actions. By electing an unworthy candidate and rejecting the true preaching of God's Word, the chapter and its chosen bishop had effectively removed themselves from legitimate spiritual authority.<sup>103</sup>

Luther also pointed to the broader historical context, noting that the church of Naumburg had turned away from Catholicism and embraced the gospel years earlier. As a result, they had fallen under the papacy's ban, curse, and disfavor. The so-called "most holy god and father at Rome"—a reference to the pope—was considered by his followers to be the supreme head of the church, a claim firmly rejected by the Protestant party.

Luther openly dismissed any accusation of perjury against this "god" and his "angels"—meaning the pope and his bishops—whom he regarded as the devil and his servants. He argued that the Protestant party had not violated any divine law but had merely broken papal decrees. In fact, he suggested that even canon law itself supported their actions, reiterating the legal principle cited earlier: *In malis promissis rescinde fidem* ("In evil promises, faith should be revoked").<sup>104</sup> For Luther, this reaffirmed that an oath made under false pretenses or to an illegitimate authority was not binding and could rightfully be rejected.

**Biblical Arguments.** Luther grounded his argument in Scripture, asserting that neither the pope's decretals, the Turks' Quran, nor the Jews' Talmud provided any authoritative teaching on the identity and nature of the church or the office of a bishop. In contrast, the only book that reliably teaches about the church and its leaders, he argued, is the Holy Bible, which was given by the Holy Spirit to instruct the church on its nature, mission, endurance, and ultimate destiny. He maintained that where the Bible ends,

<sup>103</sup> WA 53:251.

<sup>104</sup> WA 53:252.

the church ends—that is, if something is not taught in Scripture, it has no authority in defining the church.<sup>105</sup>

To support this claim, Luther again cited John 10:4–5, emphasizing that God’s voice is heard solely in Scripture. Any teaching that comes from outside the Bible—from what he called “the voice of a stranger”—should not be heeded.<sup>106</sup>

Luther then outlined the biblical qualifications for a bishop, pointing to 1 Tim 3:2 and Tit 1:7, 9. According to these passages, a bishop must be holy, preach the Word, administer baptism, bind and loose sins, and guide souls toward eternal life. He challenged the Catholic party to find among their bishops one who truly reads, studies, and follows the divinely inspired Scriptures while meeting these biblical qualifications. If they could do so, Luther stated, he would willingly allow them to call the Protestant party heretics, perjurers, and mockers.<sup>107</sup>

**Historical Arguments.** Luther next turned to historical precedent, citing the example of Valerius, Bishop of Hippo, who, due to his declining eloquence, appointed Augustine (354–430 AD) to preach on his behalf—an act traditionally reserved for bishops.<sup>108</sup> This, Luther argued, demonstrated that when bishops or cathedral chapters are unable to fulfill their pastoral duties, they should appoint a capable individual to take on the responsibility.

Applying this principle to the situation in Naumburg, Luther insisted that the Protestant party sought nothing more than the election of an effective bishop—either through the chapter itself or, if necessary, through the church’s independent initiative with the chapter’s approval. In this way, the bishop would serve under the chapter’s protection rather than be persecuted by it. He emphasized that neither he nor the elector intended to destroy the diocese; rather, their goal was to set a precedent for reforming and governing a diocese in a Christian manner.

Luther stressed that the gospel was not meant to overturn social or political structures—kings, princes, lords, citizens, peasants, and servants were not called to abandon their estates or professions. Instead, the gospel calls for an inner transformation: a turning away from false beliefs, errors, idolatry, and heresy, while remaining in one’s God-given vocation and carrying it out faithfully. In the same way, a bishop should fulfill his office as a true spiritual overseer rather than merely holding a title.

<sup>105</sup> WA 53:252.

<sup>106</sup> WA 53:252–53.

<sup>107</sup> WA 53:253.

<sup>108</sup> WA 53:253.

Luther had repeatedly urged George III (1507–1553), Prince of Anhalt-Dessau, to encourage bishops and dioceses to work toward reform while preserving ecclesiastical unity.<sup>109</sup> He concluded his argument by challenging the bishops:

What harm would it do our bishops if, following this example, they became like Valerius—entrusting certain duties to capable men when they themselves could not perform them? Let them look for such Augustines within their churches, and if they do not find them, let them help train them in schools and dioceses.... Had the chapter at Naumburg followed this advice, their election would have remained unchallenged, and they would have been spared this upheaval.<sup>110</sup>

Instead, Luther lamented, the failure of the chapter had forced secular rulers into the role of *Not Bischöve* (emergency bishops)—a situation he saw as unfortunate but necessary. These authorities now had the duty to protect pastors and ministers, ensuring that they could freely preach and serve in churches and schools.<sup>111</sup>

Consequently, both the prince<sup>112</sup> and the patron<sup>113</sup> of the diocese of Naumburg pledged to maintain the integrity and unity of the diocese, keeping it undivided as a single ecclesiastical body.<sup>114</sup> However, as “emergency bishops,” they also considered it their responsibility to uphold the gospel and ensure that the diocese remained faithful to the truth. In doing so, they hoped to set a clear and faithful Christian example for other bishoprics to

<sup>109</sup> WA 53:254.

<sup>110</sup> WA 53:254–55 (my translation).

<sup>111</sup> WA 53:255. For more on Luther’s concept of the secular ruler as *Notbischof*, see Lewis W. Spitz, “Luther’s Ecclesiology and His Concept of the Prince as *Notbischof*,” *Church History* 22.2 (1953): 113–41. The modern German spelling is *Notbischof* (singular) and *Notbischöfe* (plural), whereas Luther’s original writing style, as found in the *Exempel*, uses *Not Bischöve* (plural).

<sup>112</sup> Here, Luther was referring to Elector John Frederick I of Saxony (1503–1554).

<sup>113</sup> Luther referred to the patron of the diocese as “Herzog Ernst Gebruedere,” which likely alludes to John Frederick’s brother, John Ernest, Duke of Saxe-Coburg (1521–1553). See Caspar Ulenberg, *Geschichte der lutherischen Reformatoren Dr. Martin Luther’s, Philipp Melanchthon’s, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, Georg Major’s and Andreas Osiander’s*, translation from Latin (Mainz: Schott und Thielmann, 1836), 1:466; Johann Samuel Ersch and J. G. Gruber, *Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste: Johann (Infant von Castilien)—Johann-Boniten* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1842), 241; August Beck, “Johann Ernst, Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg,” in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1881), 14:369.

<sup>114</sup> WA 53:255.

follow—for the good of the church, the well-being of their citizens, and the salvation of souls.<sup>115</sup>

### 3.3.3. *The Appropriateness of the Consecration of the New Bishop by Hostile Heretics*

The third issue Luther addressed was whether it was appropriate for the newly appointed bishop of Naumburg to be consecrated by individuals whom the Catholic Church regarded as heretics and apostates.

Luther began by acknowledging his own unworthiness, stating that he could claim no goodness of his own and had nothing in which to boast. Like all of humanity, he was born into sin and death and remained in need of God's grace. Any good within him, he declared, was not of his own doing but a gift from his Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ. Among these divine gifts, he counted his understanding of Scripture and his ability to properly consecrate a Christian bishop—a knowledge, he claimed, superior to that of the pope and all his followers, whom he denounced as enemies of Scripture and God's Word.<sup>116</sup>

Luther further supported his argument by appealing to canon law, which, he noted, allowed for the valid consecration of a bishop even if the act was performed by a simoniac or a heretic. He pointed out that previous popes, including Boniface VIII, Julius II,<sup>117</sup> and Clement VII, had consecrated bishops despite their own questionable legitimacy. In an exaggerated rhetorical flourish, he asserted that even if the devil himself performed the consecration, it would still be valid, provided that the necessary conditions

<sup>115</sup> WA 53:256.

<sup>116</sup> WA 53:256.

<sup>117</sup> This likely refers to Pope Julius II (1443–1513). See Philippe de Mornay, *Le Mystère d'iniquité c'est à dire, l'histoire de la Papauté Par quels progrès elle est montée à ce comble, & quelles oppositions les gens de bien luy ont fait de temps en temps. Où sont aussi defendus les Droits des Empereurs, Rois, & Princes Chrestiens contre les Assertions des Cardinaux Bellarmin & Baronius* (Geneve: Albert, 1612), 1297; Barbara Wertheim Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1984), 54, 91–103; Christine Shaw, *Julius II: The Warrior Pope* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). A year after Julius' death, the satire *Julius Excluded from Heaven* appeared. Though often attributed to Desiderius Erasmus, no conclusive evidence confirms his authorship. For the text, see Desiderius Erasmus, *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings*, transl. Robert M. Adams (New York: Norton, 1989), 142–73. Rumors surrounding Julius' sexuality accused him of sodomy, though these may have been spread to discredit him. See, e.g., Lodovico Antonio Muratori et al., eds., *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores: I diarii di Girolamo Priuli*, 2nd ed., 24.3 (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1938), 396.

were met—namely, unity between the church and the bishop, the willingness of the congregation to listen to him, and his willingness to teach them.

Luther argued that these conditions were precisely fulfilled in Naumburg. The laying on of hands and the blessing simply confirmed and testified to this unity. Ultimately, he insisted, the identity of the person performing the consecration was secondary.<sup>118</sup> Whether it was done by a pastor, an angel, or even the devil, the essential point was that the bishop was truly recognized by the church.

The ordination of Nicolaus von Amsdorf was not conducted by Luther alone but involved several other clergy members whom he referred to as “bishops,” even though they were not bishops in the traditional sense. These included: Dr. Nicolaus Medler (1502–1551), pastor and superintendent of Naumburg; Magister George Spalatin (1484–1545), pastor and superintendent of Altenburg; and Magister Wolfgang Stein, pastor and superintendent of Weißenfels.<sup>119</sup> In addition, Luther’s account omits a fourth participant, Thomas Hebenstreit, the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of St. George near Naumburg.<sup>120</sup>

To defend the legitimacy of this consecration, Luther appealed to ancient church customs and canonical precedents, arguing that bishops should be consecrated with the assistance of bishops from the nearest towns. He likely had in mind passages such as Acts 1:15–26, 6:1–6, 15:22, and Cyprian’s *Epistle* 52.68,<sup>121</sup> which describe the selection and commissioning of church leaders. He insisted that this ancient model had been followed at Naumburg, where not only the so-called “bishops” were present, but also the church, the people, the princes, and the patrons in person.<sup>122</sup>

Luther concluded by challenging the Catholic authorities to apply the same standard of purity to their own hierarchy before questioning the legitimacy of Amsdorf’s consecration. If the papal party truly wished to correct abuses in episcopal ordination, they should first cleanse their own ranks—removing popes, cardinals, bishops, abbots, canons, and pastors who were guilty of simony, political patronage, corruption, secret pacts, and all other offenses that violated their own spiritual laws. Only after purging these cor-

<sup>118</sup> WA 53:257.

<sup>119</sup> WA 53:257; cf. Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 143.

<sup>120</sup> “Bericht über die Wahl und Einführung des Nicolaus von Amsdorf als Bischof zu Naumburg,” *Neue Mitteilungen aus dem Gebiet historisch-antiquarischer Forschungen* 2.2 (1835): 183; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 143. More information on Hebenstreit and the monastic school, see Wispel, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Stadt Naumburg*, 68.

<sup>121</sup> WA 53:257n9.

<sup>122</sup> WA 53:257.

rupt elements from within their own system, Luther argued, would they have the right to criticize the Protestant consecration in Naumburg.<sup>123</sup>

Using an especially caustic analogy, Luther compared the papal critique to a hog attempting to teach a dove about purity—a meaningless endeavor, given that the hog itself delights in filth.<sup>124</sup> His implication was clear: before the Catholic Church accused others of improper ordination, it needed to confront its own deep-seated corruption.

Luther further defended Amsdorf's appointment by emphasizing his noble lineage, a quality that the Catholic party often valued in episcopal candidates. More importantly, however, he insisted that Amsdorf was truly Christian, generously gifted by God, highly trained in Scripture ("more than all the papists together"), faithful and honest in heart, and a man of honorable life. For Luther, these qualifications made Amsdorf exactly the kind of bishop even the papal party should have been willing to elect. He suggested that Amsdorf aligned perfectly with the biblical standards outlined in Tit 1:7 and 1 Tim 3:2.

At the same time, Luther acknowledged that no one is truly righteous before God and that all must live by His grace and mercy. Amsdorf's appointment was not about personal merit but about preserving the gospel and ensuring faithful church leadership.

Finally, Luther made clear that neither he nor the elector sought to divide the diocese. He insisted that it should remain a unified and autonomous ecclesiastical body, with its properties, lands, and privileges intact.<sup>125</sup> The goal was not destruction but reform, ensuring that Naumburg remained a faithful and independent church, governed by the Word of God rather than by papal authority.

### 3.3.4. *Response to Julius von Pflug's Rumors*

Finally, Luther turned his attention to two rumors spread by Julius von Pflug. The first accusation was that the elector had seized power over the diocese and stripped it of its freedom. Luther firmly rejected this claim, arguing that it was entirely unfounded. He pointed out that both the estates and the council of the diocese had been explicitly assured that there was no intent to divide or destroy the diocese. This assurance had even been made

<sup>123</sup> WA 53:257–58.

<sup>124</sup> WA 53:258.

<sup>125</sup> WA 53:258.

publicly in Zeitz, making it all the more surprising to Luther that Pflug seemed unaware of it and was now spreading false rumors.<sup>126</sup>

The second rumor that Luther addressed was Pflug's claim that he had never opposed the gospel and intended to govern the diocese in a Christian manner. Luther dismissed this assertion outright, stating that the papal party had demonstrated for more than twenty years how they truly defined "gospel," "church," "Christian," and "bishop." He cited the actions of Duke Heinrich II of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1489–1568)—whom he mockingly referred to as "Heintz Mordbrenner" (Heinz the Arsonist)<sup>127</sup>—as proof of how the Catholic authorities had consistently persecuted the Protestant faith. The numerous fires that had been kindled against Protestants in the previous year, Luther argued, made it abundantly clear how the papal party interpreted these terms.<sup>128</sup> Luther further stressed that Pflug had given no indication that he would allow the diocese to teach and believe as the Protestant party did. He reiterated that the Catholic authorities had long demonstrated their deceptive use of language, a lesson the Protestants had been forced to learn under difficult circumstances. Given this history, Luther refused to concede anything to Pflug.<sup>129</sup>

#### 4. Luther's Thoughts on the Ordination of Pastors and Contemporary Catholic Views

Luther's understanding of ordination was deeply shaped by his broader theological convictions, particularly his belief in the primacy of the Word of God and his rejection of hierarchical distinctions within the clergy. This section explores Luther's perspective on the ordination of bishops and pastors, his critique of the Roman Catholic ordination system, and his vision for a

<sup>126</sup> WA 53:259.

<sup>127</sup> Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics, 1531–46* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1983), 239; Helge Steenweg, "Die Einführung der Reformation 1536 und der Brand 1540 in der Herrschaft Plesse: Mordbrenner im Auftrage Herzog Heinrichs des Jüngeren von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel?," *Plesse-Archiv* 19 (1983): 17–40; Andreas Heege, "Martin Luther, 'Hans Worst' und der Stadtbrand von Einbeck: Archäologischer Befund und reichs- bzw. religionspolitische Hintergründe," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Archäologie des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit* 16 (2005): 110–11; Reinhart Staats, "Die Hildesheimer Stiftsfehde," in *Von der Taufe der Sachsen zur Kirche in Niedersachsen: Geschichte der Evangelisch-lutherischen Landeskirche in Braunschweig*, ed. Friedrich Weber, Birgit Hoffmann, and Hans-Jürgen Engelking (Braunschweig: Appelhaus, 2010), 39.

<sup>128</sup> WA 53:260.

<sup>129</sup> WA 53:260.

biblically grounded practice of ordination. The first subsection examines the structure of Luther's ordination rites, highlighting their continuity with both his earlier practices and their departure from medieval traditions. The second subsection addresses Luther's objections to Catholic ordination, particularly its emphasis on sacramental grace, apostolic succession, and the priesthood as a sacrificial office. Finally, the third subsection outlines Luther's vision for proper ordination, emphasizing the role of the church community in electing and confirming ministers, the *ministerium verbi* ("ministry of the Word") as the central duty of both pastors and bishops, and the role of surrounding clergy in affirming the legitimacy of an ordination. Together, these discussions illustrate Luther's fundamental departure from Catholic sacramental theology and his insistence that true church authority comes not from hierarchical structures but from faithfulness to the gospel.

#### 4.1. Luther's Views on the Ordination of Bishops and Pastors

Ralph F. Smith analyzed the structure of various ordination rites that Luther employed between 1535 and 1539, identifying significant similarities in both content and sequence.<sup>130</sup> The 1539 ordination rite stands out as the most comprehensive and was also the first to be officially published in Wittenberg. As such, it serves as the primary standard for presbyteral ordination in this discussion.<sup>131</sup> A comparison between the 1539 presbyteral rite and the 1542 episcopal rite reveals a close resemblance between the two, as demonstrated in the table below.<sup>132</sup>

*Table 1. Relationship Between the 1539 and the 1542 Rite*

Presbyteral Rite of 1539	Episcopal Rite of 1542
	1. Choir: Motet "Non moriar"
	2. Congregation: Hymn "Ein Kindelein so löblich" (for the season)
1. Prayer for the candidates and for the whole ministry	3. Lord's Prayer

<sup>130</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 100–107; WA 38:418–19, 423–31.

<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 153–61, primarily examines the rites used and Luther's own explanations for them, whereas Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, focuses more on the broader ecclesiastical and political issues surrounding the 1542 ordination.

<sup>132</sup> Kolb, "Nikolaus von Amsdorf," 114; Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 156–57.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
|   | 4. Reading: 1 Tim 3:1–7                         |
|   | 5. Address to the Community                     |
|   | 6. Choir: “Nu bitten wyr den<br>Heyligen Geyst” |
|   | 7. Sermon: on Acts 20:28                        |
| 2. Choir: Veni Sancte Spiritus                                | 8. Veni Sancte Spiritus                         |
| 3. Versicle: Cor mundum crea in me<br>Deus ...                | 9. Versicle: Cor mundum crea in<br>me Deus ...  |
| Response: Et spiritum rectum                                  | Response: Et spiritum rec<br>tum                |
| Collect: Deus qui corda                                       | Collect: Deus qui corda                         |
| 4. Readings   |   |
| a. 1 Tim 3:1–7  |   |
| b. Acts 20:28–31  |   |
| 5. Address by Ordinator                                       | 10. Admonition to the Candidate<br>Answer: Yes  |
| 6. Promise by the Ordinand                                    |   |
| 7. Laying on hands with the Lord’s<br>Prayer                  | 11. Laying on hands with prayer                 |
| 8. Ordination Prayer  |   |
| 9. Reading/Charge: 1 Pet 5                                    |   |
| 10. Blessing (with the sign of the<br>cross) of the ordinands | 12. Blessing                                    |
| 11. Song: “Now Let Us Pray to the<br>Holy Spirit”             | 13. Enthronement<br>(Choir: Te Deum laudamus)   |
| 12. Singing of the Lord’s Prayer by<br>the Ordinator          |   |
|   | 14. Collect                                     |
| 13. Communion   |   |
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One key difference between these rites is that the 1542 episcopal ordination was a distinct, standalone event, whereas presbyteral ordinations were typically incorporated into the liturgy of a regular weekday or Sunday service.<sup>133</sup> The 1542 service began with a choir motet and a congregational hymn,<sup>134</sup> followed by Naumburg’s city pastor, Nicolaus Medler, inviting the

<sup>133</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 153.

<sup>134</sup> The hymn “Ein Kindelein so löblich” has been identified as “a pre-Reformation Christmas hymn to the melody ‘Dies est laetitiae.’” See Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 314n67;

assembly to prayer through the Lord's Prayer. This opening prayer paralleled the customary prayer for presbyteral candidates and the entire ministry in earlier ordination services. Medler then read 1 Tim 3:1–7, a passage frequently used in Luther's *Exempel* and one of his most important scriptural references, as noted previously.

After the reading, Medler formally presented Amsdorf as the episcopal candidate, declaring him well-suited for the office and inviting the assembly to confirm the appointment by responding "Amen."<sup>135</sup>

As Luther proceeded to the central altar to deliver the sermon, the choir sang the hymn *Nu bitten wyr den Heyligen Geyst* ("Now We Implore the Holy Ghost"), a hymn composed by Luther himself.<sup>136</sup> This same hymn had been used in the 1539 presbyteral rite before the final element of the service. Luther's sermon, lasting approximately thirty minutes, focused on Acts 20:28–31. In contrast to the 1539 presbyteral rite, where this passage served as a secondary reading, Luther now centered his homily on verse 28.<sup>137</sup> Given the difficult political climate and the burdens of the episcopal office, his sermon sought to encourage and exhort Amsdorf, warning him of the temptations of power and prestige while emphasizing the spiritual responsibilities of his new position.<sup>138</sup>

Following the sermon, Amsdorf approached the altar, kneeling on the highest step before Luther, while the *Mitordinierenden* ("joint ordinator") knelt on a lower step behind him.<sup>139</sup> Luther then intoned the antiphon *Veni*

John Julian, ed., *A Dictionary of Hymnology, Setting Forth the Origin and History of Christian Hymns of All Ages and Nations* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1892), 325; Wilhelm Bäumker, *Das katholische deutsche Kirchenlied* (Freiburg: Herder, 1886), 1:286–89.

<sup>135</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 153; Stille, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 143.

<sup>136</sup> The first stanza of the hymn was already quoted in a sermon by Berthold of Regensburg (1220–1272), a Franciscan monk. It serves as a prayer to the Holy Spirit and is reminiscent of the sequence *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which was traditionally prescribed in the liturgy for the Mass of Pentecost. See Franz Pfeiffer, ed., *Berthold von Regensburg: Vollständige Ausgabe seiner Predigten mit Anmerkungen und Wörterbuch* (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1862), 1:43. Luther added three additional stanzas—"Du werthes Licht" ("You esteemed light"), "Du süße Lieb" ("You sweet love"), and "Du höchster Tröster" ("You highest comforter")—which may allude to the theological virtues of faith, love, and hope as found in 1 Corinthians 13:13. See Johann Walter and Martin Luther, *Geystliche gesangk Buchleyn* (Wittenberg: n.p., 1524).

<sup>137</sup> WA 49:xxvii, xxix; Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154.

<sup>138</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154.

<sup>139</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 63; cf. WA 53:257.

*Sancte Spiritus* (“Come, Holy Spirit”), joined by the choir and the joint ordinators.<sup>140</sup> Notably, this antiphon was part of Guillaume Durand’s pontifical,<sup>141</sup> meaning Luther’s use of it represented a point of continuity with medieval ordination traditions.<sup>142</sup>

Luther continued by chanting the versicle, response, and Collect—all in Latin and from memory.<sup>143</sup> Since the scriptural readings had already been delivered and expounded upon by both Medler and Luther, the service proceeded directly to the formal admonition to Amsdorf regarding the responsibilities of the episcopal office. Amsdorf was asked:

Do you faithfully and diligently commit yourself to caring for all the souls of the entire chapter (*Stift*) and diocese (*Bistum*) of Naumburg? Will you oversee (*vorstehen*) and provide (*versorgen*) for them by ensuring the pure preaching of the holy gospel, the proper administration of the highly revered sacrament according to Christ’s institution, and the fulfillment of all other needs of the church?

To this, Amsdorf simply replied, “Yes.”<sup>144</sup> This brief but weighty question underscores that the bishop’s role was fundamentally the same as that of a pastor—namely, preaching the Word and administering the sacraments. However, the terms *vorstehen* (to oversee) and *versorgen* (to provide

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 64.

<sup>141</sup> Durand, also known as Durandus (c. 1230–1296), was a liturgical writer. His *Pontifical* was a liturgical book detailing episcopal practices. See Friedrich Hauck and Gerhard Schwinge, *Theologisches Fach- und Fremdwörterbuch: Mit einem Verzeichnis von Abkürzungen aus Theologie und Kirche und einer Zusammenstellung lexikalischer Nachschlagewerke*, 9th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 159; Michel Andrieu, *Le Pontifical romain au moyen âge, Tome 3: Le pontifical de Guillaume Durand*, *Studie Testi* 88 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1940).

<sup>142</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 95, 111–14.

<sup>143</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 64.

<sup>144</sup> I slightly adapted the English translation, derived from Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154, to align it more with the original German text as quoted in Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 64n54. The term *Stift* should not be conflated with the cathedral chapter (*Domkapitel*), making its translation as “chapter” misleading. However, finding a precise alternative term remains challenging. The following distinctions may help clarify the terminology: the chapter (*Domkapitel*) was a college of clerics responsible for advising the bishop and, in his absence, governing the diocese. The diocese (*Bistum* or *Diözese*) referred specifically to the bishop’s spiritual jurisdiction, whereas the *Stift* encompassed both the spiritual and secular territories of the bishop, including associated persons, buildings, and properties. See Hauck and Schwinge, *Theologisches Fach- und Fremdwörterbuch*, 55–56, 187.

for) suggest that while the bishop would not necessarily carry out these duties himself, he bore the responsibility of ensuring that the pastors under his care fulfilled them properly.<sup>145</sup>

Luther and the joint ordinator then laid hands on Amsdorf, praying over him. A comparison of Luther's various ordination prayers suggests that while he followed a consistent structural model, the content of the prayer remained adaptable to the specific occasion.<sup>146</sup>

Following the prayer, Luther delivered a blessing, which combined elements of benediction and exhortation—a form of “paracletic admonition” as described by Brunner.<sup>147</sup> The blessing was immediately followed by Amsdorf's enthronement. The joint ordinator led Amsdorf to the choir, where the action was accompanied by the singing of the *Te Deum laudamus*, performed by the organ, clergy, and congregation. The service concluded with Medler, who had opened the ceremony, offering the final Collect.<sup>148</sup>

#### 4.2. Luther's Critique of Roman Catholic Ordination

Luther's interchangeable use of the terms *Weihe* (“consecration”) and *Ordination* has already been noted, but the significance of this equation warrants further examination. While he retained some elements of medieval tradition, as seen in his use of a hymn from Durand's pontifical, he simultaneously rejected the official Catholic definition of ordination as found in the *Pontificale Romanum*. The Catholic rite of episcopal consecration, titled *De examinatione, ordinatione et consecratione episcopi*,<sup>149</sup> distinguished between *ordinatio* (which applied to all clerical ordinations up to the presbyteral office) and *consecratio* (which was reserved exclusively for episcopal consecration). By equating these two terms, Luther implicitly rejected the Catholic hierarchical distinction between the presbyterate and the episcopate, a position he had maintained consistently—namely, that “the presbyterate and the episcopate were identical.”<sup>150</sup>

Luther further identified three fundamental errors in the Roman Catholic understanding of ordination, which, in his view, corrupted the rite and

<sup>145</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 154–55; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 64.

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 155.

<sup>147</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 155; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 65–66; WA Br 9, no. 3709, 609, 12.

<sup>148</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 156; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 67.

<sup>149</sup> Andrieu, *Le Pontifical romain au moyen âge*, 3:374.

<sup>150</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 158.

transformed it into an *inordinatio diaboli* (“a disorder of the devil”).<sup>151</sup> These errors were:

1. *Ordination as a Sacrificial Priesthood*: The Roman Catholic ordination was not focused on the ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments but on creating a priesthood centered on sacrifice. Luther rejected this understanding, emphasizing that ministers were called to preach and teach, not to offer new sacrifices.<sup>152</sup>
2. *Ordination as a Spiritual Transformation*: The Catholic rite, in Luther’s view, erroneously aimed to make a priest into a “spiritual person,” even though baptism had already conferred spiritual identity upon the believer. He particularly opposed the use of chrism (holy anointing oil) in ordination,<sup>153</sup> arguing that it falsely symbolized a new conferral of the Holy Spirit, whereas true anointing had already occurred in baptism.<sup>154</sup>
3. *Ordination Without a Specific Pastoral Call*: Catholic ordination, Luther contended, was granted “absolutely,” without requiring a specific pastoral office or a concrete call to a particular congregation.<sup>155</sup> Because of this lack of connection to an actual pastoral function, Luther regarded Catholic ordination as null and void. Since it was performed *sine verbo* (“without the Word”), it did not confer the right to baptize, consecrate, or preach.<sup>156</sup> However, since a pastoral office could be assigned apart from the ordination itself, Luther did not consider reordination necessary for those who had already been installed in an actual ministerial role.<sup>157</sup>

Another key point of Luther’s critique was the Catholic claim that ordination was a sacrament of the New Covenant. He insisted that a true sacrament required two essential elements: divine institution and a promise of grace. While baptism and the Lord’s Supper met these criteria, ordination

<sup>151</sup> WA 54:428; Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 168–70. While true *ordinatio* establishes order, *inordinatio* disrupts it. The term could also be understood as a devilish counterfeit of ordination.

<sup>152</sup> WA 6:524, 564; 12:172; 52:569. The disengagement from the ministry of the Word is evident in the requirement for a new authorization (*alia vocatio ultra ordinem sacramentalem*) for a priest to obtain the right to preach. See WA 6:565; 38:220, 235.

<sup>153</sup> WA 38:198, 205, 220.

<sup>154</sup> WA 12:179; 38:228, 230, 234; 41:155; 50:631.

<sup>155</sup> WA 12:172, 232–34.

<sup>156</sup> WA 12:174; 15:720.

<sup>157</sup> WA 12:174; 38:221, 236, 243.

did not—for nowhere in Scripture was it established as a sacrament.<sup>158</sup> He thus dismissed the Catholic claim as a *figmentum ex hominibus natum* (“a human invention”), arguing that the false elevation of ordination to a sacrament was a mockery of God.<sup>159</sup> In a particularly scathing remark, Luther declared that Catholic ordination was not a *sacramentum* but an *execramentum*—a rubbish ordination, equating it to bodily excrement rather than a means of grace.<sup>160</sup>

Luther also addressed the validity of ordination performed by heretics, pointing out that even Catholics accepted the legitimacy of bishops consecrated by heretical or simoniacal clergy. This, he argued, demonstrated the objective validity of ordination, which did not depend on the moral or spiritual state of the ordinator but rather on the unity of the church and the bishop in a mutual promise. He extended this principle to baptism, noting that baptisms performed by heretics were still considered valid. If this was the case for baptism, he reasoned, the same should hold true for ordination.

Thus, Luther redefined the proper role of the bishop not as one who lords over the people but as a servant of the church.<sup>161</sup> He rejected the notion that ordination conferred a special grace or divine authority and instead emphasized that the bishop’s legitimacy derived from his election by the church and his faithful execution of the ministry of the Word. The next section will further explore Luther’s concept of episcopal unity and the proper function of the ordained minister.

### 4.3. The True Practice of Ordination in Luther’s Perspective

Luther did not reject the practice of ordination itself but rather its corruptions within the Roman Catholic system.<sup>162</sup> His goal was to restore a proper canonical doctrine of ordination, grounded in Scripture and the early church tradition. In his view, ordination was not a sacramental act that conferred a special grace but rather a formal confirmation of a prior election by the Christian community.

According to Luther, bishops were to be elected by the people and then

<sup>158</sup> WA 6:560–65; 10/2:220; 54:428.

<sup>159</sup> WA 6:565; 12:172–74.

<sup>160</sup> WA 12:170.

<sup>161</sup> WA 53:257; Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 158.

<sup>162</sup> Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 171. Georg Rietschel, *Luther und die Ordination*, 2nd ed. (Wittenberg: Herrosé, 1889), 48, asserted that Luther developed his doctrine of ordination in opposition to the Roman ordination. However, Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 171, argued that the textual evidence does not support this claim.

confirmed by other bishops from neighboring areas, a process he described as occurring “without any further boasting.”<sup>163</sup> In this model, ordination served as a public acknowledgment of the church’s decision and a commissioning into the preaching ministry.<sup>164</sup> However, Luther recognized that Amsdorf’s election deviated from this ideal since his candidacy was determined by the elector rather than the congregation. Even so, the church’s public affirmation of the elector’s choice was, in Luther’s view, sufficient to uphold the legitimacy of the ordination.

Luther placed great emphasis on the communal and public nature of ordination. He insisted that the episcopal office must always be understood within the context of the church community and never apart from it.<sup>165</sup> He likened the process to a wedding, in which a mutual relationship is publicly affirmed through a formal ceremony. Just as a wedding is validated by the participation of witnesses, so too was a bishop’s legitimacy strengthened by the presence of clergy from surrounding towns. This ensured that episcopal elections were not merely local matters but acts that carried broader ecclesiastical recognition.

The laying on of hands in ordination, according to Luther, did not impart a supernatural gift but rather served as a visible testimony of unity. This view sharply contrasted with the Catholic understanding, in which the ordinator was believed to confer a special grace, authority, and apostolic succession upon the ordinand. While Catholic canon law required that episcopal elections be confirmed by the pope through the Roman Curia, Luther dismissed this as unnecessary.<sup>166</sup> In his framework, legitimacy did not derive from papal approval but from the election and ordination process itself.<sup>167</sup>

Finally, Luther emphasized that the core function of both bishops and pastors was the *ministerium verbi*—the ministry of the Word. The ordination service and its accompanying vows reflected this singular focus on preaching and teaching. Unlike the Catholic hierarchy, which distinguished between the priesthood and the episcopate, Luther held that pastors and bishops shared the same fundamental office—that of proclaiming the gospel

<sup>163</sup> WA 6:408.

<sup>164</sup> WA 6:407; cf. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 171.

<sup>165</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 159; cf. Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 196–207.

<sup>166</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 159; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 72–73.

<sup>167</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 159–60; Brunner, *Nikolaus von Amsdorf*, 75.

and administering the sacraments.<sup>168</sup> Thus, ordination did not create a higher clerical status but simply affirmed an individual's call to the preaching ministry.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined Martin Luther's understanding of episcopal ordination, apostolic succession, and the authority of bishops, particularly as reflected in his *Exempel, einen rechten christlichen Bischoff zu weihen*. Luther fundamentally redefined ordination by rejecting the necessity of apostolic succession and shifting the focus from hierarchical structures to the *ministerium verbi*—the ministry of the Word. According to his model, a bishop should be elected by the Christian community and confirmed through the participation of neighboring clergy, whose role was not to bestow sacramental authority but to affirm the legitimacy of the appointment. The laying on of hands was not a means of transmitting grace but a public testimony of unity. This reorientation of ordination eliminated the Catholic distinction between episcopal consecration and presbyteral ordination, reinforcing Luther's belief that pastors and bishops shared the same fundamental calling: the faithful proclamation of the gospel.

While Luther's theological vision was clear, its practical implementation in Naumburg proved more complex. The power struggle between the cathedral chapter, the city council, and the Elector of Saxony raised questions

<sup>168</sup> Smith, *Luther, Ministry, and Ordination Rites*, 160–61. For more information on the episcopal office, see Martin Brecht, ed., *Martin Luther und das Bischofsamt* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1990). Regarding Luther's teachings on episcopal consecration and ordination, see Rietschel, *Luther und die Ordination*; Jürgen Diestelmann, *Studien zu Luthers Konsekrationslehre* (Braunschweig: Pfarramt Brüdern-St. Ulrici, 1980); Richard Walter Schoenleber, "The Sovereign Word: The Office of the Ministry and Ordination in the Theology of Martin Luther" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1983); Lieberg, *Amt und Ordination*, 19–242; Martin Krarup, *Ordination in Wittenberg: Die Einsetzung in das kirchliche Amt in Kursachsen zur Zeit der Reformation*, Beiträge zur historischen Theologie 141 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); Adriani Milli Rodrigues, "The Priesthood of Christ and the Priesthood of All Believers in the Theology of Martin Luther" (research paper, Andrews University, 2012), 29–36. See also Merlyn E. Satrom, "Bishops and Ordination in the Lutheran Reformation of Sixteenth-Century Germany," *Lutheran Forum* 33.2 (1999): 12–19; James M. Kittelson, "Historical and Systematic Theology in the Mirror of Church History: The Lessons of 'Ordination' in Sixteenth-Century Saxony," *Church History* 71.4 (2002): 743–73; Krarup, *Ordination in Wittenberg*.

about who ultimately had the right to appoint a bishop. The elector's decisive intervention in 1542—installing Amsdorf as bishop against the chapter's wishes—demonstrates the deep entanglement of religious and political authority. Although Amsdorf's ordination followed Luther's prescribed model, his selection had more to do with political strategy than congregational consensus. Moreover, Amsdorf remained heavily dependent on both the elector and the Wittenberg theologians, blurring the line between theological conviction and political necessity.

Luther's critique of Catholic ordination was sharp and comprehensive. He rejected the notion that ordination conferred a sacramental grace or transformed an individual into a higher spiritual status. Instead, he viewed Catholic ordination as a distortion of apostolic teaching, perverted by the false idea of a sacrificial priesthood and the artificial distinction between clergy and laity. His comparison of episcopal and presbyteral ordination rites further underscored his conviction that bishops were not a separate order but simply pastors entrusted with additional responsibilities.

Despite the clarity of Luther's theological framework, certain unresolved tensions remained. If ordination was not a sacramental act and did not require apostolic succession, what ultimately legitimized a bishop's authority? While Luther placed this authority in the hands of the church community, in practice, it was the elector—not the congregation—who selected Amsdorf. Furthermore, while Luther championed the right of Protestants to reject papal bishops and ordain their own, he did not extend this principle to groups he deemed heretical. Would he have allowed the same autonomy for Anabaptists or other radical reformers?

These questions highlight the lasting significance of Luther's break with traditional ordination practices. By prioritizing the *ministerium verbi* over institutional succession, he laid the foundation for a radically different vision of church leadership—one that continues to influence Protestant ecclesiology to this day.