

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF ORDINATION?

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ORDINATION IS A FORM OF CERTIFICATION

At the purely human level, ordination is a form of certification. The captain of the plane my wife and I flew on recently had gold bars decorating the epaulets on his shoulders. They spoke volumes -- years of supervised training, classroom courses, piloting under expert supervision, and even refresher procedures from time to time. If, we had noted when we boarded the plane, that he was dressed in sweats and sneakers we would have turned away and inquired about other flights. It would have been clear that he was not yet qualified for the task of flying 262 people from point A to point B 1400 miles in distance.

The same matter of certification holds true for the doctor I saw recently. He had credentials posted on his office wall that told me where he had studied medicine, what specialty he was qualified to practice, and any special certifications he had gained beyond these. I would not have let him put his cold stethoscope on my chest as one step in his examination if I had not been sure he had been certified to do so. In fact, I would not even put my four year old automobile on the hoist of a mechanic for transmission repairs if he could not show evidence of being certified to do the repairs

Certification is a common sense reason for ordination. As Moses learned from his Midianite father-in-law, we can learn from our secular world. All such serious temporal enterprises, whether dealing with my life, health, or valuable property should be conducted by qualified personnel and that requires some form of certification. That is, evidence that the person has been examined and approved by experts who were qualified to judge.

Admittedly, even then, there are degrees of excellence within the ranks of the certified, and there are occasionally certified practitioners who don't deserve the trust we are asked to place in them. We expect such incompetent persons to be eventually sorted out. Moreover, we should not use the incompetence of the few as an argument against the certification of the many. Certification procedures in many realms still erect standards by which the public generally can make its choices and be protected.

WHY MINISTERS SHOULD BE CERTIFIED

Ordination is not intended to bestow honor; it is intended to bestow authority for service. When one thinks of this authority, the need for certification is obvious. A minister is authorized to teach the Scriptures and the doctrines of the church. This requires more than a cursory knowledge; it calls for serious supervised study and eventual certification. In their line of duty, ministers may enter the homes of the community to visit a young family, or to pray with a housebound elderly person. Ministers may call on hospital patients on the eve of their surgery. Or they may be called on to counsel parties to a crumbling marriage, or to hear the painful confessions of a deeply troubled conscience. Ministers may also be called upon to represent their church at a community function.

In each case, the minister is conducting a "representative ministry." That is, in a sense, every member of the church is a minister but does not have the time or training to carry out all such pastoral duties. So, the church is provided with a minister who can represent the body in such situations. Some authorizing body must be responsible to act on behalf of the denomination in determining that this person has the basic education, training, and Christian character for such assignments. This calls for a carefully laid out program leading to certification and oversight.

THE NEW TESTAMENT ON ORDINATION?

The detail about the preparation of persons for ordained ministry is buried deep in the history of the New Testament church. There we are not told everything we would like to know. Even so, although the explicit word for ordination does not appear in the Greek Scriptures, there are a number of indications to show that care was taken to set apart certain believers for the special task of ministry or oversight. For example, from his wider throng of disciples, and after a whole night of prayer, our Lord set apart twelve of his followers as "apostles" (Lk. 6:12-16). The word means, "one sent with a commission." Jesus gave them authority to carry out a special ministry on his behalf.

Later, after the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost, the developing church had to face the need for a fairer distribution of resources to needy widows. The whole body was asked to choose seven men "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3) and to bring them before the Apostles. In Luke's record Stephen is singled out among the seven duly chosen as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). The Apostles in turn, by prayer and the laying on of hands, set the seven apart to be deacons (servants) to the church (Acts 6:6). In this brief account we can see that the whole company of believers was consulted but the authority of the Apostles was exercised for the actual ordination by means of prayer and the laying on of hands.

The fullest insight into the developing practices of the early church is given in the pastoral epistles. In writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul exhorted, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you (1 Tim. 4:14). Three things stand out in this concise word. (1) What he was to exercise was given to him as a gift (charisma); in other words a spiritual endowment he would need for the work of ministering. (2) The gift was apparently bestowed in his case through a prophetic message. (3) The gift was conferred by means of the laying on of hands.

There are other references to the act of setting apart for ministry which we refer to as ordination. The Apostle Paul may have had reference to the same ordaining event as above when he wrote, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands (1 Tim. 1:6). Apparently Timothy tended to be timid and the Apostle, his spiritual mentor, was reminding him that whatever was given in the initial ordination was not to be left to merely smolder but was by spiritual discipline and earnest application to be kept flaming brightly.

One thing that stands out in the pastoral references to the setting apart of leaders in the New Testament church was the emphasis on integrity of character. Much is said about this. The overseer must "fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:19). He must be "above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self controlled, respectable ..." (1 Tim. 3:2ff). In the same passage, he must be "apt to teach" and therefore is expected to be well taught in the Scriptures and the formulation of Christian doctrine. Given such high requirements, it is not surprising that Paul's instructions included that an ordinand "must not be a recent convert ..." (1 Tim. 3:6) and this is matched by the Apostle's later instructions "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands," (1 Tim. 5:22). This is an obvious reference to what the church through the centuries has called ordination.

The New Testament makes clear that the act of ordination must not be seen as some sort of a terminus for the minister. Development must go on. Ministry must continue to be fresh, ardent and effective. It is to have a growing edge, especially in the teaching and preaching of the Word. Paul wrote to Timothy long after Timothy had been set apart for ministry by the laying on of hands and had been Paul's companion in mission, "Work hard so God can approve you. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15 NLT).

ORDINATION PRACTICES SINCE THE FIRST CENTURY

Ordination is not a recent invention of the church. The New Testament makes it clear that from the beginning certain believers were set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands for the work of full time ministry. Some call it representative ministry because it is a ministry in which special officers act on behalf of the whole congregation. Paul reminded Titus, for example, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint (ordain) elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). But minimal detail is given as to specific procedures. As the Christian church

of succeeding centuries developed, it locked onto the insights set forth in the New Testament, holding to them firmly, and then filling out the details.

For example, the word “ordinand” is related to the word “order.” It has to do with how the church orders its life and particularly its leadership. It suggests that a person is set aside in the church for holy office. Ordination, however, is not just an event; it is a process. Properly speaking, from the time candidates enter the process they are ordinands. This reflects the historic concern shown that persons set apart for full time ministry are to be as fully prepared for the task as is possible before they are ordained by prayer and the laying on of hands.

With the passing of the centuries different Christian bodies have developed ordination procedures they believed were consistent with the will of the Lord of the church. Sometimes, it appears, concepts have gone well beyond New Testament standards. For example, by the end of the Middle Ages the Roman church had developed doctrines and procedures that established the primacy of the clergy over the laity. This made the church too hierarchical. The Reformation theologians repudiated it. Ordination does not bestow some special grace over that of ordinary Christians. But ordination is intended to bestow a special power and authority for service. Ordination, with the laying on of the hands of the ordained elders implies the bestowal of a divine gift for service. This is generally agreed to by most Christian communions.

The church assumes that at the end of the process, a threefold authority has been bestowed upon the ordained minister. (i) There is the internal authority of an inward call of God. Throughout the process, care is taken to assure that the person under training understands and possesses an authentic divine call to the ordained ministry. (ii) There is an external authority bestowed by the church in the ordination service itself. The ordaining officer will say, “Take authority “ (iii) There is the authority of a godly life. Ordination must not be thought of as only an event, a one hour service of public worship; it must also be seen as a process. Throughout the training period, the ordinand is prompted to develop a devotional life that is daily and authentic, and to gain a basic understanding of how to preach and teach the Scriptures, as well as to master the issues of ministerial ethics, and to live a life that is blameless before God. For pastoral effectiveness there is no substitute for this third aspect of the minister’s authority. Neither the divine call nor the certifying action of the church can be a substitute for a godly life.

THE BLESSINGS THAT FLOW FROM ORDINATION

Men and women can get value from reflecting on the ordaining process. It is more than simply a series of frivolous exercises like “jumping through hoops.” It is a serious effort, bathed in prayer on the part of all participants, to find, direct, guide and certify those persons upon whom God has placed his call to ordained ministry. And it is a serious effort to bring them to that moment when the prayers of the church and the laying on of the hands of the elders links them to the chosen company of the ages who have accepted God’s special call and have responded in obedience. No Christian body should claim that its ordination procedures exactly reproduce the practices of the New Testament church. But all procedures should have the fundamental elements spoken of there --prayer and the laying on of hands. This is where the Free Methodist Church stands.

Here are some of the blessings that flow from ordination.

1. Ordination gives confirmation that a careful effort has been made to recognize and affirm in a minister a subjective inner call from the Lord matched by an objective and outward call of the church. And this recognition is important not only to the ordinand and his family but to the body to which ordained ministers offer their services. For example, in any congregation there are likely to be many who have taken pains to be certified for their respective vocations. It is only right that the minister sent to lead them should also have seriously prepared for a spiritual leadership assignment too.
2. The event of ordination, -- the prayers of the worshipping body and the laying on of hands of the elders -- authorizes the candidate to carry out the demanding work of ministry on a day-to-day basis. One is not long into the work of representative ministry before it becomes evident that “we wrestle not against flesh

and blood.” Real ministry is warfare. It is good at such times for the minister to look upon the call as not only divinely given but also as sealed by a company of God’s people. Ordination is a moment to look back to and draw upon.

3. Ordination gives one a sense of belonging. One is not merely an adherent, a hired hand, a salaried worker, a performer, a careerist, a mercenary. One is living out a divine calling in company with other women and men who labor under the same mandate. Ordination should give one a collegial sense, a sense of having been taken into a company of people upon whom both Christ and his church have laid hands of commissioning.

4. The sense of calling involved in ordination anchors one in life and gives one a sense of purpose that can’t be easily reduced to a mere “career.” That sense is there when the temptations to seek easier work is brought on by the kind of stresses that only ardent ministers know. Ordination is really a testimony that we believe God has set us apart for a special ministry and the church has set us apart to live out that calling.

5. When ordination is taken seriously by both ordinands and the church it tends to contribute respect to all concerned. It is not that ordination is for purposes of honor. It is rather for purposes of service. Ministers often are called to suffer as an element in their calling. For some, the cost has been persecution and death. Nevertheless, when the work of ordination is done seriously and men and women are well prepared for their task, this tends to nurture respect -- the respect ministers have for themselves, the respect congregations have for their ministers, and the respect ministers show their congregations.