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The Meaning and Practice of Ordination

"RECEIVE the Holy Ghost for the office and work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful dispenser of the Word of God, and of his Holy Sacraments; In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. . . . Take thou Authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the Holy Sacraments in the Congregation, where thou shalt be lawfully appointed thereunto." These age-old words ring in the ears of the Anglican priest at his Ordination; they leave him in no doubt of the solemnity of his calling, and wherein it consists; they promise and they declare, unhesitatingly and without qualification.

And we are Baptists, and we have our own certainties; or so we would claim. But what of our theological students as they set out upon their ministry? I am back at my own Ordination, re-living the painful groping for mental clarity and spiritual assurance, knowing that I was being caught up into something of crucial importance which must constitute an anchor upon which, in future years, I would have again and again to lay hold, yet desperately conscious that there was lacking an understanding of it which was my rightful heritage. Many words were spoken; too many of them devoted to informing me of what Ordination did *not* mean. No Church can live upon denials. It was time for a sustained enquiry.

The Committee set up by the Baptist Union Council to explore this problem has finished its labours. Its report is now before us. No one would claim that it has answered all the questions. In the nature of the case that was impossible. But within its terms of reference it has gathered information, laid down lines of thinking, and made recommendations. It must now be discussed and judged.

Little space need be devoted to certain sections of the Report. The section and appendices given over to an outline of past and present Baptist doctrine and practice are competent, and as adequate as might fairly be expected. If there is more of practice than of doctrine we need not be surprised. If there are clear signs of the pervasive influence down the years of non-theological factors we

need not be outraged. If we are left with an impression of inconclusiveness it was only to be expected. This is the measure of our problem and the index of our situation. Thus it is that our attention must be focused upon the pages dealing with the biblical material and with the contemporary restatement of the meaning and practice of the rite. Here is the heart of the Report. By this it stands or falls.

Let it be said at once that the discussion of Ordination in the New Testament almost does its job magnificently. It is the most encouraging feature of the whole Report. The author sets the rite firmly and securely in the context of the biblical doctrine of Church and Ministry and provides an exposition of noteworthy sanity and balance. The Church is a living organism and a divine creation—the body, the family, the vine. Yet it is composed of free, responsible persons—members, disciples, friends. It faces constantly in two directions, towards God and towards the world; for if, on the one hand, it exists to be the people of God, to glorify Him in worship and fellowship, on the other hand, it exists to bear witness to the great acts of God, through preaching, baptism and humble service. These are priestly and prophetic functions; and they belong to the whole Church. It is only within and on behalf of that Church that the Ministry finds its place, as a gift of God imparting form to the christian organism.

On the basis of this ecclesiological exposition, the Report goes on to speak boldly of the New Testament doctrine of the Ministry. Those who will exercise forms of ministry in the Church are appointed by God, equipped by the Risen Lord through his Holy Spirit; and this carries with it two important corollaries. Ministers are not simply the representatives of the Church, bearing its commission, armed with its delegated authority. They act in the name of Christ, bearing the authority of his appointment, speaking to the Church in his name. Further, they are ministers of the whole Church, not simply of some local community. Just as the local church is a manifestation of the One Body of Christ, so the ministry exercised in that local church is a ministry of the one divinely-created Fellowship.

If we ask how the true Ministry may be distinguished from the false, we are not left without biblical guidance. The man whose ministry is truly valid will in the deepest sense belong to the people of God, will manifest the fruits of holiness, will possess the necessary gifts which are the endowment of the Spirit. But the assurance of the call of God must never stand alone, and individual conviction must be tested and confirmed by the community. The conclusion must be that, if we are to be true to the New Testament teaching, we must assert that the Ministry originates in the operation of the Spirit, is sanctioned by the Christian Church, and is exercised for the edification of the Body. These are the guiding lines to which we

must hold fast. Of such convictions, New Testament practice in Ordination (so far as we can trace it) provides the outworking and the expression.

It is just at this point that the exposition falters, leaving its earlier promise unfulfilled. The New Testament section limps to its conclusion on a few generalised and unsatisfactory paragraphs designed to draw out the implications of what has been established. Its argument is never again really taken up and developed. We are left with a short statement of the meaning of Ordination which begs more questions than it faces. It is not surprising that the practical suggestions and recommendations amount to little more than a summary of what is increasingly present practice.

Why does the Report fail after so encouraging a beginning? It is essential that this question be asked and answered, for with it is bound up the clue to so much of our denominational confusion. Must it not be frankly admitted that what is missing from this document, as from so many others, is a sustained attempt to think theologically in a systematic way? The Report lacks one crucial section, an attempt to build theologically on the New Testament foundation laid. Because of that it lacks coherence, progression, unity, and a worthy attainment of its goal.

Probably the most important sentence in the Report is this: "Conceptions of the ministry do not stand by themselves; they belong to an understanding of the nature and function of the Church." This is wisely said. And the Committee goes on to urge that the Council give "early and urgent attention to the production and publication of studies, based on a detailed consideration of biblical and historical evidence, of the Baptist concept of (a) the nature of the Church, and (b) the Ministry." But this is not enough. The problems cannot thus simply be shelved. The fact is that the Report contains an examination of New Testament teaching relative to the doctrines of both Church and Ministry, and moves on to make considered statements about the meaning of Ordination. Once such issues were raised and an attempt made to deal with them, the group was surely committed to ruthless and relentless theological thinking, however provisional might be its conclusions. It is to be regretted that the Report should be issued to the churches before this task was discharged.

The careful reader will not fail to notice the shifts of emphasis that are revealed when we move from the New Testament exposition to the section on the Meaning of Ordination. The critic might even suspect that the shift is from individual insight to group compromise. Certainly the two make strange bed-fellows. Perhaps both must share the blame, though in differing proportions. We have suggested that the summary of the New Testament teaching just fails to realise its full potentialities. It lacks its rightful begin-

ning and its necessary conclusion. The progression is from Church to Ministry to Ordination; and though the stories are in right order the building lacks its foundation. Behind ecclesiology is christology, always and for ever. Christ is the beginning, theologically as in all other ways. The ministry of the Church is grounded upon the one unchanging Ministry of its Lord. We look at the outset for some clear recognition of the pivotal significance of the earthly Ministry of Christ, and we look in vain.

So it is that the end of this section is not a conclusion but a terminus. We are left with a few comments on the relationship between continuity and adaptability, between life and form. The New Testament, we are told, "does not suggest that the Lord imposed a rigid pattern of ministry upon His Church." But what if there is a christological pattern that is normative and what if there is a form, imposed by a christological criterion, that is binding? We are told that "the Spirit is free." But what if the Spirit is always and only the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what if pneumatology must be grounded in christology, what if life and form are tied together more closely than we have supposed? These are the important questions. This is the place for intensive theological assertion. Does the section peter out in a cul-de-sac because at the very beginning the christological signposts were never erected?

If it be objected that theological restatement properly belongs to a later part of the Report, to the section on the Meaning of Ordination, we shall not cavil at such a defence. Indeed, it is just here that the most serious criticism must be entered. The Report never really builds upon the New Testament foundation. The theological superstructure is never erected. We turn away from the Scriptures, chase through the kaleidoscopic confusion of the centuries, and suddenly emerge with guidance for future theory and practice which, while it has clear links with the New Testament, is related a little too simply and obviously to what we are accustomed to do and to teach. The essentially stern theological discipline is lacking.

Let us begin at the beginning. "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give his life a ransom for the many" (*Matt.* 20:28). His calling was to be the Suffering Servant of the Lord, to reinterpret messiahship in terms of obedient suffering, and thus to redeem. He was prophet, priest and king—of each and all the fulfilment. In Him the Kingdom of God moved finally and redemptively into our human situation, and royalty was found to be service. His whole regal life was, at the truest and deepest level, precisely his *Ministry*. He washes his disciples' feet and thus betrays his kingship. As True Prophet, Himself the incarnate Word of God, He speaks the word of reconciliation. As True Priest, Himself the slain and offered Lamb, He makes atone-

ment. And in that unity of word and deed the Servant-King accomplishes his Ministry.

This Ministry remains his own, though He has now ascended to the heavenly places. He is for ever the One who is highly exalted yet marked with the scars of his humility, the eternal Intercessor, the living Word who ever and anew moves forth to men through the power of his Spirit. He retains his Ministry within his own hands. Yet between the two Advents, in the "time" of the Church between Pentecost and Parousia, the Body of Christ is caught up into the Ministry of her Head, as the Twelve participate in the drama of redemption and disciples become apostles. "As my Father hath sent me, even so I send you" (*John* 20 : 21). "Receive ye the Holy Ghost : whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (*John* 20 : 22f.). "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world" (*John* 17 : 18). "Whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (*Matt.* 21 : 26f.). Upon the apostolic mission and commission the Church is built, and within it the Ministry of the Ascended Lord reaches down to history and out through history towards the Parousia.

So it is that the whole Body of Christ shares in the Ministry of her Head. She is the place where the saving events of the Gospel are made powerful in history; she is the sphere within which the first and second Advents are drawn together, where, by the working of the Holy Spirit, what has been and what will be are made present in power. Through her the reconciling Ministry of Christ moves onward to its fruition. She is the prophetic, priestly and kingly Body, in so far as she participates obediently and responsively in the continuing Ministry of her Lord, and in the might of his Spirit proclaims the Word and offers the Sacraments and carries the Cross. The ministry of the Church is first and foremost a corporate ministry.

Nevertheless, within that corporate priesthood there is diversity of function and operation. Of "ministries" there may and will be many; but the institutional priesthood constitutes a special and constant gift of the Ascended Lord to his Church. The ministry, in this narrow sense, is properly described by reference to the Word and the Sacraments, and that for no arbitrary reason. For between Pentecost and Parousia the Body of Christ seeks for renewal and strains towards fulfilment, and it by means of the Word and Sacraments that the living Lord provides renewal and brings fulfilment near. On Word and baptism the corporate priesthood of the whole Body is grounded. By reference to Word and eucharist the nature of the institutional ministry must be explicated.

This ministry of Word and Sacrament is ordained for the building up of the Body of Christ. By it and through it the Church,

the kingdom of priests, is again and again subjected in obedience to the great High Priest who alone governs and empowers. By it and through it the living Word ever and anew reaches forth to its sacramental fulfilment in the eucharistic fellowship as the Church is broken and remade. From first to last the christological pattern is determinative. Ministry of the Church and ministry in the Church is conformed to the Ministry of the Lord and is subservient to it. As the Word made flesh, crucified and risen, He is true Prophet and true Priest in the kingliness of his Servant-Ministry. In its own fashion, and on the ground of baptismal incorporation into his death and resurrection, his Body the Church shares in the eternal Ministry of her Head, preaching the Word, offering the Sacraments, carrying the Cross. And within that corporate priesthood, ministry in the Church and to the Church arises, itself kingly, priestly, and prophetic. It is the ministry of Word and Sacrament and pastoral service. It is for the building up of the Body. It is the instrument through which the Word moves forth to its inevitable sacramental concretion in the eucharistic drama of redemption. The cruciform pattern remains. Because all ministry is a sharing and reflection of the One Ministry, it must be conformed to the marks of the Suffering Servant of God.

In some such terms as these, it may be suggested, the necessary theological foundation for any fruitful discussion of the meaning and practice of Ordination must be laid. In this light we may again take up our examination of the Report; and at once we have to take issue with the definition of Ordination. This rite—so runs the Report—“is an act of the Church, wherein the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, publicly recognises and confirms that a Christian believer has been gifted, called and set apart by God for the work of the ministry and in the name of Christ commissions him for this work.” We may deprecate such an attempt at definition, especially before it has been firmly established what is the nature of this ministry and wherein it consists. But it is more important to notice the characteristic separation of Christ from the Church, the laying down of “before” and “after,” the failure to allow to Ordination very much more than a recognition of something which is essentially true and accomplished already. We may readily allow the priority of the call of God, just as we shall assert that a man may be in believing relationship to Christ prior to his baptism. But just as to be a Christian means to be baptized, so to be a minister means to be ordained. Head and members belong inseparably together; the *Totus Christus* cannot be divided. These temporal divisions are artificial, unbiblical, and therefore disastrously misleading. If definition is to be made it must basically be this: “Ordination is an act of Christ in his Church whereby a Christian believer is made a minister of the Church of God.”

The New Testament section is profoundly right when it emphasizes that the ministry is a gift of God *to* the Church, and that it is the ministry of the *whole* Church. Would that these notes were allowed to be adequately normative in the subsequent exposition. The Report confesses that "the local church is not an isolated unit." Yet the admission seems a grudging one and, in respect to Ordination, the weight still falls on the local church setting. If Ordination is to the ministry of the One Church, then its conventional relationship to Induction should seriously be called in question. Similarly, if ministry is a gift of Christ *to* his Church, the Report must be challenged in so far as it seems to lay weight upon the idea of the minister as speaking to the world from within the fellowship and in the Church's name. Surely there is dangerous half-truth here, resulting from the lack of clear theological premises. The ministry is turned towards the Church and towards the world; but the source of its turning is twofold, and the differentiation must be observed. The minister is turned towards the world as one among many, on the ground of his baptismal insertion into the corporate priesthood of the Body. He is turned towards the Church as one to the many, on the ground of his ordination to the institutional ministry.

In the end, the theological lacuna proves disastrous for the attempt at detailed discussion of the ordination rite. Ordination is the act by which "the Church recognizes, confirms and commissions." It is a public "acknowledgement and authorisation." It is a "spiritual process." It is "an occasion of blessing." There is more of ambiguity here than may safely be attributed to the necessary mysteries of Christian faith. What seems lacking is the clear and unqualified recognition that the nature of the ordination rite is correlative to the nature of the ministry to which a man is ordained. That ministry is the ministry of the Word made flesh, of Word and Sacrament, of Word proceeding to its eucharistic completion. Ordination is not a sacrament; but it looks towards the Sacrament, is indissolubly bound to it, and finds in it its necessary consummation. The confirmation of the call of God by his Spirit and through his Church, the commissioning of his servant, the invocation of the Holy Spirit—all this the rite must fitly express and affirm. But its completion is not Induction but Holy Communion. The rite has its own independent significance. Yet it is maimed until it finds its consummation at the point where a man is caught up into the Ministry of the Head to the Body, faces a congregation in a figure as *alter Christus*, and *for the first time* breaks the bread and pours the wine for the renewal and wholeness of the Church of God. As baptism is inseparably joined to the corporate priesthood of the Church, so Holy Communion is tied to the institutional priesthood of the ordained ministry. The link

between Ordination and Eucharist is closer than the Report allows.

From this vantage point the suggested Order of Service must be judged. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that here an opportunity has been missed. There was room for an attempt at creative experiment. What we are given is avowedly based "upon the common practice." But if what we have suggested corresponds at all to the realities of the theological situation, it must surely be admitted that Ordination belongs to the Service of Word and Sacrament, the heart and centre of corporate worship. Such a Service will rightly include Questions addressed to the ordinand, a Charge to him, and a confession of faith from him; and the act of Ordination itself will find its focus in the prayer of invocation and the Laying on of Hands. But precisely because it is concerned with ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments the Service will move towards two pivotal actions. The one is the presentation to the ordinand of the Scriptures, the abiding deposit of apostolic witness and the ground of prophetic ministry. The other is the placing of the bread and wine by the Area Superintendent at the very beginning of Communion into the ordinand's hands, that so receiving the tokens of his priestly ministry as from his Lord he may turn at once to minister in the holy things of God to the gathered church. Thus will Ordination find its true and necessary sacramental fulfilment.

This means that any confusion of Induction and Ordination must be carefully avoided. We can but deplore the attempt at integration. That the call to and acceptance of the pastorate of a local church or some congruous sphere of service is a necessary prelude to Ordination we must affirm. That some representative of the calling body should be involved in the Ordination Service we must agree. But that the actual Induction of a minister belongs to the sum and substance of his Ordination we must deny. A Service of Induction can be a solemn occasion where a Charge to the church is fitly given. It can also include all the informality of a family welcome. But the once for all Service of Ordination, whereby a man becomes a minister of the whole Church of God, moves to its completion at the Lord's Table not at the tea-table.

Where the rite of Ordination is performed may be adjudged a matter of minor importance. The natural place is at the church to which a man has been called; and the Committee advances cogent reasons in support of this practice. Nevertheless, until the prevailing confusion has been removed from the minds of our people and the two acts of Ordination and Induction are seen in their proper and separable places and filled with their true and distinct meanings, the weighty practical arguments in favour of the home church remain. In any event, it is what is done rather than where it is done that is significant.

All attempts to formulate a satisfactory theology and practice of Ordination have to reckon with the tragedy of disunion. While the Body of Christ is rent asunder anomalies will remain. We can but move as far as our partial insights will carry us and hard practical realities will allow. This Report should stimulate our thinking and encourage us to advance. It contains so much valuable material and so many paragraphs of wise counsel that the lack of a unifying theological factor is doubly disappointing. It is to be hoped that it will arouse argument and discussion. It is also to be hoped that it will not be regarded as having said the last word.

N. CLARK

Note: The Report referred to in this article is to be published, and copies will be obtainable from the Carey Kingsgate Press, 6, Southampton Row, London, W.C.1, price 2s. 6d., postage 4d. extra.

STOP PRESS

Final details of the Annual Meeting of the Historical Society have now been fixed. It will be held at 4.30 p.m. on Monday, 28th April, at the WESTMINSTER CHAPEL, Buckingham Gate. In addition to the business of the Society, an address will be given by Dr. Thomas Richards on "Some Disregarded Sources of Baptist History." Tea will be provided.