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The Origins of the Threefold Christian Ministry¹

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As the limits of an article make it impossible to give a wide-ranging, in-depth analysis of the formation of Christian ministry, I decided to approach the subject by using the analogy of an archaeological dig! This seems to me to be highly appropriate because the origins of Christian ministry are shrouded in mystery and we have to rely upon the scanty information available to us in literature and church architecture. Taking samples from the past, and analysing them in the light of the period in question, finds echoes in archaeological research and therefore appears to be not an inexact model.

1 Substrata: the secondary nature of ministry

It was fashionable at one time for theologians and church historians to teach that the New Testament presents a single form of ministry which was exclusively authorized as an ecclesiological model for all time. This view still persists in some areas of church life, but the research of scholars like Harnack, Sohm, Streeter, Schweizer, von Campenhausen, et al., argue convincingly that there is not one single system in the New Testament but rather a number of different ministries. 'All have won and all shall have prizes' was B. H. Streeter's comment on the desire of modern churchmen—Roman Catholic, Anglican, Free Church and Independent—to find justification for their own particular brand of ministry.

This is not to say that ministry is unimportant, or that a theology of ministry is lacking in this earliest level of our enquiry. Far from it, but ministry in the New Testament is always secondary. It presupposes a prior concern with the gospel itself. This New Testament ministry is expressed in a number of ways for a particular purpose. Whether we talk of the great three—apostles, prophets and teachers—or the local ministry of bishops, deacons and presbyters, the clear fact is that they are part of that medium by which the gospel comes and the church is organized. Ministry, in a New Testament sense, serves both gospel and church and very properly is a servant of both soteriology and ecclesiology and is called into being by the Spirit. Gospel, church and Spirit are the threefold foci of ministry.

Before we make observations on other levels in our 'dig', there are

three New Testament facts which are important to recall. First, New Testament ministry takes its starting-point from Jesus and his ministry. Properly speaking, an apostolic succession is not 'high' enough. Jesus called to him men and women to live and teach his gospel. Jesus the 'preacher' becomes Jesus the 'preached one'. The 'Word lived' becomes the 'Word expressed' in words which become revelation to his people. Second, from the beginning ministry is functional, not ontological: that is, it does not proceed from a carefully formulated 'necessity', but rather from the more makeshift life of the New Testament church which found it had something to say to the world. The terms 'apostle', 'prophets', 'bishops' and 'deacons' show this functional aspect. From this follows my third remark—and it is surely a most important truth for the modern church—there is no room for distinctions between *kleros* and *laos*, between clergy and laity. The *laos* is the people of God, and all are *kleros* because all are called to exercise functions within the body.

2 Order v. Spirit

From the debris scattered around at this second level of the second century, we can observe that some problems were being experienced as different ministries served the church. To some degree the battleground was marked out in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians expresses Paul's anxiety over abuse of spiritual freedom and illustrates his attempt to bring back 'extremists' to a fourfold criteria of ministry:

- a) Respect for the weaker brethren: 8:9
- b) Christ's pattern of gentleness and love: 13:1
- c) The fact that the one Spirit does not offer a graded system of gifts: 12:4–11
- d) The necessity for order in the body: 14:26–33

We do not know if Paul's advice was heeded at Corinth. What we do know is that a later generation of Corinthians chose to ignore it, because thirty years later the church of Corinth was divided again, if Clement's letter is anything to go by.

The problem seems to have been that the church was governed by an eldership which had been overthrown by a young group of men. On hearing this, Clement (c. AD 96), a member of the church of Rome, wrote a long letter appealing to the rebels to reinstate the elders to office. His letter argued that God loves order, and the heart of his appeal comes in chapter 42:

The apostles received the gospel for us from Jesus Christ, and Jesus the Christ was sent from God. So Christ is from God, and the apostles are from Christ: thus both came in proper order by the will of God. And so from the apostles, after they had received their orders, and in full assurance by reason of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, being full of faith in the word of God, went out in the conviction of the Holy Spirit, preaching

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the good news that God's kingdom was about to come. So they preached from country to country and from city to city, they appointed their first converts, after testing them by the Spirit, to be the bishops and deacons of the future believers.²

He continues later:

And our apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the title of bishop. So for this reason, because they had been given full foreknowledge, they appointed those mentioned above and afterward added the stipulation that if these should die, other approved men should succeed to their ministry. Those therefore who were appointed by them or afterward by other reputable men with the consent of the whole church, who in humility have ministered to the flock of Christ blamelessly, quietly, and unselfishly, and who have long been approved by all—these men we consider are being unjustly removed from their ministry.³

As we know well, the epistle of Clement has been signalled as presenting definite proof of the doctrine of apostolic succession. Here, it is argued, we have a clear link between the ministry of Christ and that of the later church. He ordained the twelve, and they ordained bishops. The continuity of ministry is expressed in the 'laying on' of apostolic hands. Allied to this conclusion based upon Clement's arguments, the testimony of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, is appealed to. On the way to Rome, to face martyrdom in AD 117, Ignatius wrote six letters to six prominent churches, extolling the office of bishop as the centre of the church, a symbol of unity, a guardian of the faith, without whom the church does not exist. Ignatius uses an interesting and unusual analogy. The bishop represents the Father, the deacons represent Jesus and the presbyters represent the apostles. It does not dawn upon Ignatius to equate the bishop with the apostles, which, if he had done, would have been of some theological significance to later generations. Ignatius, however, wrote a seventh letter which is of some importance because of what it does not say. To the church of Rome—the church which Clement had represented twenty years previously—Ignatius mentions no bishop, and no exhortations to any such a person colours this epistle. There is clearly no single leader in the church of Rome to whom the episcopacy-obsessed Ignatius can appeal. This is borne out by the quaint *Shepherd of Hermas*, written forty years later, where it is clear that the church of Rome is led by presbyters-bishops, and prophets and other 'charismatic' figures have prominent roles. But, by the end of the second century, Rome also has a clear structure of leadership in which the monarchical bishop is the central figure.

What, then, do we make of this rather confusing picture? A number of facts emerge. The first is that the church of the sub-apostolic age was witnessing a transition from the flexibility and fluidity of a missionary

situation to that of ordered communities which needed leadership, pastoral care and teaching. The days of the wandering teacher-prophet were numbered. The church of Asia Minor bears this out. Ignatius is addressing his remarks to churches under threat of Gnostic infiltration, and the appeal to rally around the bishop stems from this situation. The Ignatian order is now a static one—bishop, presbyters and deacons. The famous threefold order has arrived. Later, other churches will establish this order also.

But what about Clement's letter to Corinth? What weight should we place on his arguments? A number of interesting points emerge. a) Clement clearly believes that the ministry of the elders is of apostolic origin. Yet we note there is no sign of mono-episcopacy here, and the plurality of leadership is obviously in mind. b) We observe that whatever he says about the apostolic nature of the presbyteral office, the local church itself had a say in the appointment of its leaders. Clement protests that the elders who had been deposed had been elected 'with the consent of the whole church', perhaps intimating that the new leadership had not. We shall observe the importance of the principle later. c) Clement was the first to argue from the order of Jewish worship. For the first time, Christian ministry is interpreted in the light of Old Testament priesthood. This will have significance much later. But, based on this, a distinction is drawn between the *klerikos* and *laikos*, analogous to the Jewish distinction between 'high priest and the people' (1 Clem. 40:4 ff.).

If Roman Catholic and Anglican theologians found their favourite ministerial models in Clement and Ignatius, continental theologians such as Sohm and Harnack found theirs in the *Didache* and *Hermas*. These writings, which showed the prophets flourishing in the church, made these scholars differentiate between the 'charismatic' ministry of apostles, prophets and teachers, and the 'non-charismatic' ministry of the local ministry expressed in that of bishops and deacons. In point of fact, such a reading of the evidence is foolish and unnecessary. The coming of 'order' in a settled ministry did not spell by itself the passing of the 'charismatic'—there were other reasons for that—but was rather an inevitable consequence of an expanding church which needed a settled leadership.

Before I move to the third layer, a word about the threefold order of ministry. This is extolled in our own day as the most ancient of church orders and one that should be the model for future union schemes. It is certainly true, as we have seen, that in Ignatius' letters it appears to be an adequate order of ministry. But let us not forget that the Ignatian bishop is the leader of one church, not a metropolitan figure exercising authority over a wide area. He is more like a present-day vicar than a present-day bishop. The presbyters appear to be like a modern-day PCC, and the deacons are assistants to the bishop, supporting him in his sacramental roles. But before very long the lines of differentiation

are blurred. The office of bishop takes on a metropolitan role; the presbyters become like 'bishops' in a local context, limited only by their inability to ordain; the deacons shift from being assistants to bishops, to that of assisting presbyters. By the sixth century, the diaconate is but a step to presbyteral ordination. It is clear that confusion surrounding the threefold office began a long time ago!

3 Grace v. law: a juristic ministry

I drew attention at the beginning to the fact that New Testament ministry is anchored in gospel, church and Spirit. There can be no confusion between the way of salvation and the functions of ministry, because in the New Testament salvation is by grace—not of oneself. Salvation is a gift of God alone, which is made available through the effects of Christ's atoning death. He, Priest and Victim, offers himself to all men. To be sure, salvation is never fully received in this life, because Christian man is 'just' and 'a sinner' at the same time. He lives by grace throughout life, and will know in his life the power of God and the effect of sin. 1 John sets the parameters of this: 'If we say we have not sinned, we deceive ourselves. . . ' (1:8); 'Whoever is a child of God does not sin' (3:9). This is only comprehensible within the context of God's grace. Alas, grace was the first New Testament insight to be lost—with terrible consequences. T. F. Torrance argues that the sub-apostolic writings failed to understand grace and replaced it with the concept of Christ as a teacher who brought a new revelation, or Christ as the new Moses who introduced a new law.⁴ The *Shepherd of Hermas* illustrates the problem well. The church of Rome was obviously being weakened by Christians who failed to live up to their high dignity as followers of Christ. Hermas cannot explain how Christians, whose sins had been washed away in baptism, were still sinning. It is obviously inexplicable to him and can only indicate gross disobedience and unfaithfulness. Hermas' angel calls upon the church to repent, and a second and final chance is announced. A 'jubilee' of forgiveness is declared, and if sinners repent all will be well. If they do not, then, after this jubilee, post-baptismal sins will not be forgiven.

Hermas does not attach to ministry any special functions: it is simply their task to declare this second chance. But the next step was taken by the great and fiery Tertullian, ex-lawyer, who makes of penance a piece of ecclesiastical machinery. He is the first to differentiate between 'mortal' and 'venial' sins. Mortal sin—murder, apostasy and adultery—apparently is not forgiveable. Venial sins, that is all other offences which separate the Christian from the redeemed community, must receive the recompense of 'penance' before the sinner can be readmitted to the company of the faithful. The 'power of the keys' is vested in the bishop, who has received the authority of Peter to forgive the sins of others. It is true that when Tertullian became a Montanist he denied

that the bishop had this right, but by now the damage was done. The episcopal office, and in time the presbyteral, included the power to forgive sin.

Perhaps the most important shift that took place in this understanding of ministry—albeit dimly—was that from ecclesiology and soteriology to Christology. In other words, the pattern of Christ becomes the pattern of ministry. His priesthood becomes the model of a Christian ministry. The next level of our ‘dig’ will reveal the significance of this Christological basis.

But let us make this clear: the function of ministry to point to God’s forgiveness which is available to the one who repents, is a proper function. It is proper to hear ‘confessions’ and to bring God’s word to the sinner. But to arrogate to the priesthood the right in itself to say what sort of action would atone for such and such a wrong, takes us into the worst kind of legalism. Tertullian must take his share of blame for such a development, which would in time flower into the medieval notion of merit.

4 Priest v. pastor

Our fourth level reveals the presence of a sacramental concept of ministry which, although it was there from the earliest times, is from the time of Cyprian the dominant factor present in Christian ministers. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (AD 210–58), inherited a juristic concept of ministry, but he is significant for the new colouring he gives to the office. Although his main aim in his numerous writings is to bring stability and order to ministry at a time of great uncertainty, he invests it with notions which were not clearly seen before. Now authority is conveyed and confirmed by a special act of *sacramental ordination*. This makes a priest truly a priest, and a bishop really a bishop. Henceforth he can pass on special charisma by the laying-on of hands in baptism or penance; as bishop he can ordain and offer the eucharistic sacrifice. But Cyprian does not believe in the ‘indelibility’ of sacramental initiation. The bishop or priest who denies Christ, loses the power of his office because he places himself outside the church. Cyprian’s clergy are, therefore, in the church, and receive validation of office from it as well as its efficacy. Outside the church there are no means of grace and no salvation; hence his insistence upon heretics being rebaptized—an argument he lost.

The ‘priestly’ character of ministry thus receives a very full expression in the theology of Cyprian. Three particular aspects are of some importance. First, the role of the priest in the matter of receiving the ‘lapsed’ back into the church, gives the clergy a crucial role in penitential discipline. The priest, as well as the martyrs, can convey God’s blessing and forgiveness: the latter by his blood; the former by the church’s authority, through which he may give sacramental absolution. Second, Cyprian’s emphasis on ‘priesthood’—largely shaped by

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borrowing from Old Testament imageries as well as depending upon legal categories drawn from his previous secular profession—will, after the Constantine Settlement, help to turn the clergy into a sacerdotal class. Third, Cyprian's concept of ministry is church-centred. Clergy are ordained to a particular community. There is thus an essential connection between community and ministry. The people not only have a right to minister but they have a say in who is appointed. Cyprian calls the choice of the minister by the people a 'divine right' (Epist. 67:4).

* * * *

Drawing my 'diggings' to a conclusion, there are some reflections which the modern church would do well to heed.

1) While the 'pipe-line' theory concerning apostolic succession is not historically tenable, it is surprising how many still adhere to it for their theology of ministry. Roman Catholics in discussion with Anglicans, and Anglicans in discussion with Free Churches, are wont to base their theology of ministry on historical models which are false. In discussion with other Christians, we shall do well to remember that the first two hundred years of the Christian era show diversity in the understanding of ministry.

2) The outline above shows how easy it is for an incorrect theological development to take place when ministry overlaps with Christology and soteriology. The soteriological development took place when ministry became the only channel for dispensing the grace of forgiveness and decreeing the nature of penances. The Christological development came about as the priest was seen to be representing Christ to the church, and also representing the church to God. As ministry thus acquired a mediatorial role, its ecclesial standpoint was abandoned. In this way, a theology of ministry developed without an ecclesiology.

3) The movement we have traced destroyed the dialectic between ministry and church. As the ministry became more sacerdotal and less sacramental, it was defined less in terms of function and more in terms of 'being'. Ordination gave a unique grace, power and status. The celibacy of the clergy reinforced the idea of difference from other Christians. Schillebeeckx comments on this development in the medieval period: 'At a time when virtually everyone was baptized, the boundary between the "Spirit of Christ" and the "Spirit of the World" came to lie with the clergy.' Ministry thus became the church, and laymen were defined in terms of being non-clerics.

In our own times, whilst we are discovering a theology of the laity, we must acknowledge that we are still obsessed with questions concerning clerical ministry. Perhaps the confusion will not be resolved until we have sorted out our theology of ordination or, possibly more

basically, that of discipleship. We noted earlier the important role lay people had in ministerial appointments. This *sensus fidelium* has much to say to us today.

4) Lastly, we observed that in the New Testament and sub-apostolic periods there was a great upsurge of ministries which, however bizarre, bewildering or frightening they might appear to be, actually were the channels of the Spirit of God to his people. Perhaps this is a reminder to us that our concern with 'understanding' ministry (which assumes that ministry is somehow objective and static) is not as important as allowing the Spirit free rein, and the gifts of the people free expression. Let God be God, we might say.

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NOTES

- 1 This article is based on a lecture first given at the Evangelical Staffs' Conference in 1980.
- 2 'The First Epistle of Clement', in R. M. Grant, ed., *Apostolic Fathers* (Nelson, New York 1964), ch. 42.
- 3 *ibid.*, ch. 44.
- 4 T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1948).
- 5 E. Schillebeeckx, 'A Creative Retrospect as Inspiration for the Ministry in the Future', in E. Grollenberg, ed., *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?* (SCM Press, London 1980) p.69.