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**Ordination.**

J. Thompson.

Our understanding of Ordination<sup>1</sup> can only be properly interpreted in relation to the meaning of the Church and the ministry within it. Let me begin, therefore, by giving two brief definitions.

(a) The Church is the Body of Christ, of which He is sole Head and King, the fellowship of believing people in Heaven and on Earth.

(b) Ministry (Diakonia) means Service and takes four forms:<sup>2</sup>

(1) The chief minister or servant of the Church is Jesus Christ himself who came not to be served but to serve and give his life a ransom for many. Matt 20:28. All other ministry is service rendered to and in the name of Jesus Christ.

(2) The Church as a whole is engaged in ministry, as a corporate body, called together to be Christ's servant, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. (1 Pet 2:9).

(3) Each individual as a member of the Church has his or her own service to give in the fellowship.

(4) Within this total context there is what we call to-day the ordained ministry of word and

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<sup>1</sup> This Paper was originally given at a conference held by the East Belfast Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1989.

<sup>2</sup> T. W. Manson, The Church's Ministry, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1948) pp. 17ff.

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sacraments of the eldership in our reformed understanding of it and various other ministries.

I take the first three for granted and do not comment further on them but concentrate for a moment on the pattern of ministry as we find it in the New Testament<sup>3</sup> and then go on to deal with ordination in particular.

The early period in the Church's ministry and life was characterised by considerable flexibility and variety. It was a time of missionary outreach carried out by apostles, prophets, evangelists, a time of establishing, overseeing and teaching the new churches. Those engaged in this task were called and equipped by the Holy Spirit and exercised their gifts freely. The main ministries were the following:

(a) Apostles<sup>4</sup>

The twelve called, set apart by Jesus to be his Apostles, had a unique position as those who accompanied him during his earthly ministry and were witnesses of the resurrection. Together with these who had a unique position in the early church, there were others called apostles who were sent to preach the gospel, exercise pastoral oversight and possibly ordain or commission others to minister. These all stood in a special relationship to the gospel as its inspired interpreters and ambassadors. In fact the word apostle has a

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<sup>3</sup> C. K. Barrett, Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament, (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985);

R. P. C. Hanson, Groundwork for Unity, Plain Facts about Christian Ministry, (London: S.P.C.K., 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Hanson, op. cit., pp. 10ff; Manson, op. cit., pp. 31ff.

missionary connotation in that it means simply, one who is sent. Therefore in the New Testament it has both a restricted definition in relation to the twelve and Paul and a wider interpretation. There is no evidence that its functions were handed on exclusively to Bishops in what has come to be known as Apostolic Succession. It is however true that there is an Apostolic Succession of scriptural testimony which embodies the Apostles' teaching, of ministry and of charismatic gifts. But certain characteristics of the Apostles, that is their special relationship to Christ and New Testament testimony were unique and unrepeatable.

(b) There is a further group of those whom one might call charismatic figures,<sup>5</sup> called by the Holy Spirit for particular forms of ministry within the Church and they may or they may not have been appointed or ordained by anyone, but simply acknowledged and recognised by the different congregations. These were prophets, evangelists, healers, those who spoke in tongues - gifts which some thought had ceased with the apostles but are being recognised today and were recognised by Calvin at the time of the Reformation as continuing, though perhaps with less authority than that of the Apostles and other ministers.

(c) As time went on the Church was established in many places in the Roman Empire and took a more settled structured form though it at the same time always had an aspect of flexibility, adjustment to change of circumstances and missionary outreach. The older form of ministry remained side by side with the newer settled one and these newer settled ones which one finds in the later parts of the New Testament, particularly in Timothy and Titus, gained considerable significance and prominence. There were three such

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Manson, *ibid.* pp. 57ff.; Barrett, *op. cit.* p. 35f.

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offices or services<sup>6</sup> - that of Presbyter (Elder), Bishop (Episcopos - overseer), and Deacon (Diakonos). It is recognised by many that the first two, Presbyter and Bishop, are virtually identical, that they were engaged in preaching, teaching, pastoral ministry, rule and oversight. The Deacon may have been used more in serving the needy, though possibly also in other tasks.

The question arises as to how all these people, these apostles, ministers and others were appointed, for the word "ordain" does not appear in any translations except the Authorised Version in Mark 3:14. Two answers can be given. Firstly, the apostles were themselves appointed by Christ and they went on to appoint others as ministers of the Word. Secondly, as has been pointed out, possibly some were simply recognised as charismatic figures who under the influence of the Spirit and with considerable gifts assumed leadership in the Church. This may have been their only appointment. We have several examples, however, of people being set aside, appointed or ordained in the New Testament. I illustrate several of these though it is not a full list. In Acts 6:6 it is clear that the chief ministry is that of the Word or Gospel and that seven deacons were appointed by the

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<sup>6</sup>5. Hanson, o. cit. pp. 13 ff; Barrett op. cit. pp. 40 ff.

<sup>7</sup>6. World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Report of Commission on Ordination and Ministry. (Geneva, 1954), pp. 10 ff.; T. F. Torrance "Consecration and Ordination," Scottish Journal of Theology 11/3, pp 225ff.; J. M. Barkley "The Meaning of Ordination," Scottish Journal of Theology 9/2, pp 135ff.; T. Wotherspoon and T. M. Kirkpatrick (Revised and Enlarged Edition by T. F. Torrance and Ronald Selby Wright), A Manual of Christian Doctrine (2nd), (London: O.U.P.) pp 79 ff.

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Apostles to minister to the needy widows and give them the opportunity to concentrate on the ministry of the Word. Again in Antioch in Acts 13:3 Barnabas and Saul or Paul are appointed by the local congregation to be missionaries under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 14:27 it speaks of Presbyters being appointed by the Presbyters in the Church by prayer and fasting.

For the whole question of appointment or ordination some of the key passages on which we base the teaching on our ministry and ordination are 1 Timothy 4:14 and with it 2 Timothy 1:6. These passages assume that in each church there are Presbyters already appointed to act and that Timothy has been so appointed. It states, "Do not neglect the gift God has given you by prophetic utterance when the Council of Elders or the Presbytery laid their hands upon you." 2 Timothy 1:6 states, "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of hands." In all these cases it was either the Apostles themselves or a council of Presbyters who set apart or ordained others appointed to be Presbyters, Ministers, preachers within the Church and to the Gentiles.

In the light of these passages we may say with confidence that men and possibly women were appointed to minister in the Churches and beyond them; the term appointment or commissioning is a more general one and the term ordain, as a more technical term, came in later. Since, however, our Lord commanded his first disciples to baptise and there was also the command to them to remember Him in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper it has been accepted that, possibly from earliest times, the ministry of the Word had attached to it that of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is not expressly stated but simply implied.

The churches today differ in their understanding of who should appoint, set apart, ordain people to

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these forms of ministry. The Anglicans<sup>8</sup> and Roman Catholic position is that the Bishop as a successor of the Apostles is the one who should ordain. We believe in our tradition that this should be done by fellow Presbyters, that the ministry certainly succeeds the Apostles but neither Bishop nor minister can ever repeat their unique once-for-all role and authority in relation to Christ. Since our Presbyterian form derives largely from Calvin<sup>10</sup> at the time of the Reformation it will be helpful to have a brief look at how he understood the ministry and ordination.

On the basis of Ephesians 4:11f. and Romans 8:6f. Calvin spoke of four classes of office in the Church as Christ's will and gift. A pastor is called to preach and administer the sacraments, doctors to teach the faith and future ministers. They are theological teachers equal to ministers. Thirdly there are elders who, with the pastor, exercise spiritual oversight, pastoral care and discipline, and lastly, deacons to serve the poor. Calvin saw these as in one sense particular offices but in another means of service or functions to be performed. He also recognised special powers and functions exercised at particular times e.g. Apostles, prophecy, the gift of healing the sick. While ministry of all these kinds is service, it is also the duty to rule.

In the light of all this what does appointment,

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<sup>8</sup> K. E. Kird (Ed.) The Apostolic Ministry; S. L. Greenslade, "Ordo," Scottish Journal of Theology, 9/2 pp. 161 ff.

<sup>9</sup> Greenslade, ibid., pp 161-5.

<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion iv, 3.4.

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commissioning or ordination mean?<sup>11</sup>

(1) The fact of an initial call by God tested and approved by the Church as a whole. There is then subsequent training in preparation for one's task.

(2) It is an act of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Just as He was the anointed one by the Spirit so in the act of ordination it is Christ by his Spirit who is the chief actor.

(3) It is at the same time an act of the Church or of Christ through the Church as the Council of Elders or Presbytery. There is an orderly transmission of ministry and succession.

(4) Ordination is by prayer and the laying on of hands.<sup>12</sup> Prayer is for the blessing of the Holy Spirit, the setting apart of a person to the specific functions of preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, shepherding the flock and enabling it to be a community of faith, love and service.

Some believe a special charisma or gift is given at the point of ordination or a particular status or office. These are disputed points but it can be said that the minister so appointed has a certain office, is given grace for the task by the Holy Spirit. The laying on of hands is mentioned in several places in the New Testament where such an appointment or ordination takes place. It was taken over from the Old Testament where we find various instances of the laying on of hands.<sup>13</sup>

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11 See for a useful summary J. M. Barkley, op.cit. p. 142 and T. W. Manson, op.cit. pp. 95 f.

12 Hanson, op.cit. p. 16.

13 1 Timothy 4:4; 2 Timothy 1:6.

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It is given a two-fold meaning: either the recognition of gifts already given by the Spirit and now enhanced or a prayer for such to be given and expected.

(5) In one sense a particular authorised group ordains, in another it is the Church as a whole that is involved. Both in fact go together. The Church issues a call thus acknowledging God's original call.

(6) Ordination is to the one Church of Jesus Christ and is in this sense to the Church Catholic. There is no idea in the New Testament of denominations; all are appointed or ordained to the one, holy, catholic Church. There was thus no problem of recognition of ministries in the Early Church.

(7) The minister so appointed is assigned a particular community or task to perform. He or she cannot fulfil their task in a vacuum or in parallel to the Church or in any sense superior to it but only in and with it. The minister is a servant of Jesus Christ in and through the Church. No distinction between clergy and laity is made rigid.

It is only outside the New Testament that different views came to prevail, partly because of changed circumstances and the threat of division<sup>14</sup> and heresy. A more authoritarian character prevailed.<sup>14</sup> As far as we can see, the Church at the end of the First Century was served by Presbyters or Bishops - often more than one in a particular place - a plurality of Presbyters.<sup>15</sup> It is probable that the Bishop was an equal Presbyter who

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<sup>14</sup> Hanson, op.cit. p. 31 ff; Barrett, op.cit. 89 ff.

<sup>15</sup> T. M. Lindsay, The Church and Ministry in the Early Centuries, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903) pp. 196f.

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had a different function, that of pastoral oversight. Later there emerged one Bishop over a whole area, a diocese. Later still the idea that a minister was a priest came to be accepted, taking as example the priest in the Old Testament who offered sacrifices. In the New Testament, however, it is interesting to note that Christ is called Priest or the great High Priest who offers Himself, the Church is a royal priesthood, individual believers are priests to God and our Father, but nowhere is the minister of the Word ever called a priest.

There are three questions which are sometimes raised.

(a) How far is our present practice in accordance with New Testament teaching and precedence? in the light of what has been said it is, I believe, by and large correct, both as to the nature of ministry and ordination. It is a reasonable summary of New Testament teaching to say that ordination is to the ministry of word and sacraments, to the gospel and gospel ordinances and of course also with elders to the oversight of a congregation and to missionary outreach.

However the New Testament has a greater variety of ministries than we have, was more dynamic and less static, was also open to the possibility of God simply raising up people who were un-ordained to speak His word. To-day one can think of parallels to this in evangelists and others who still serve the Church and preach who are not ordained. At the same time we recognize the need for order, for recognition, within and for the fellowship and its extension, and that people cannot merely act as a one-man band. The New Testament also had team ministries whereas we have been very much tied to a one minister and a minister-centred conception of ordination and the Church. To-day also one of our latest attempts is in fact to establish team ministries within the Church and this would accord with

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New Testament precedent. The Church as a whole had and exercised more of a variety of ministry in the New Testament than we do to-day so that we have to make up a considerable amount of leeway.

If however, as we have seen, the New Testament has this broad view of ministry where some simply rose to prominence because of their gifts, and others were commissioned or ordained one can scarcely exclude women from such leadership and service. In other words, in New Testament terms, they are part of the ministry of the Body of Christ as a whole and may therefore be legitimately called and set apart to this service.

Again, if our view of Word and Sacraments is basically correct, how come that we allow un-ordained men and women to occupy our pulpits and yet not to administer the sacraments? We are inconsistent here with our own teaching. On the one hand we underline the Word and its priority, its preaching and we tend to minimise the Sacraments. On the other hand we exalt the Sacraments by confining administration of them to ministers and our practice here lessens preaching by opening it to non-ordained people. I do not say that the latter is wrong, nor that we should permit non-ordained to administer the Sacraments; it is something, nonetheless, that we should think about because it is an issue which is unclear and needs to be thought through and worked out more consistently than we have done so far.

(b) Are there many Ordinations? If appointment or commissioning is virtually equivalent to ordination the answer is yes. The differences are that to which people are appointed. One could however, I believe, make out a good case for saying that ordination is primarily to the Word and Sacraments and that all others are appointed to different tasks and functions. I am not, however, speaking against the term ordination being used of others. Students at the college, for

example, who are already elders often ask me do they have to be ordained again - assuming thereby that elders and ministers are equal, which in one sense they are. The answer I give is yes; they have to be ordained since the eldership is to ministry in a local congregation, and not the Word and Sacraments, whereas the latter is to the Church Universal. At any rate the nature and meaning of appointment or ordination is determined and carried out and there can be considerable variety of these in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup>

(c) Is Ordination irreversible? That is, is there a permanent character to it? Is it like saying, once saved, always saved? The answer is that we in the Reformed Tradition have given is that there is such a thing as permanence in the Call of God, and His appointing or ordaining through the Church. The New Testament does not envisage Timothy, Titus or any others giving up their service of Christ but continuing through the remainder of their lives. It sees false prophets and wolves within the fold, but in these cases they may not have been called of God at all and their commission may have been under false pretences in the first place.

To-day we hold this same view that we are set apart for life though naturally anyone can be suspended temporarily, be asked to resign the actual work of the ministry if serious offences have been committed either in doctrine or in practice but ordination is to a ministry which is unceasing, which can only be carried out by a life-long commitment. It is effective if exercised in accordance with its true nature of dedication and service. One parallel that is sometimes given is baptism or justification by faith which covers the whole of life and has to be worked out in daily

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Ibid. pp. 36ff.

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living throughout the whole of one's life. It is once therefore to be administered.

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