

# ORDAINED? TO WHAT?

Joseph D. Small  
Office of Theology and Worship

[This essay appears in *Ordination and Authority*, Theology and Worship Church Issues Series, No. 8]

The first assignment given to the new Theology and Worship Ministry Unit following Presbyterian reunion was to conduct a study of the “Theology and Practice of Ordination.” That this was the theological priority of the newly formed Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gives clear evidence that the understanding of ordination was in serious disarray twenty-five years ago. The intervening years have only worsened the disorder.

Since the 1970’s, Presbyterians have been arguing about who can be ordained (educators? gay and lesbian persons?) as well as about the character of the “quasi-ordination” of commissioned lay pastors. We argue about *who*, without a cohesive understanding of *what* ordination is and *to what* persons are ordained. It may be that our disagreements about *who* are related to our confusion about *what*.

## Ministry of the Whole People of God

When I was a pastor, I avoided frequent “children’s sermon” duty. Sharing the dubious privilege with associate pastors, educators, and elders, I restricted my times to once a month. On the Sundays that I was responsible, I almost always talked with the kids about worship – liturgical colors, banners, windows, hymns, pulpit font and table, robes, and more – with special emphasis on Baptism and Eucharist each time we celebrated the sacraments. I also followed two rules that I learned from the late educator David Ng: (1) prepare as carefully for the children’s time as for the sermon, and (2) never ask questions.

Inevitably, the day came when I broke both rules. It was on a Sunday when elders were to be ordained. Unprepared, I rambled, talking with the kids about working together in the church, and explaining that some people were about to begin a particular form of service to our congregation and our community. Stumbling along aimlessly, I told them that later in the service these people would come to the front of the sanctuary where we would ask them to kneel for prayer while the ministers and session members placed our hands on their heads. And then, to my horror, before I could bite my tongue, I heard myself say, “Why do you suppose we put our hands on their heads?”

I wasn’t quite sure of the answer myself, so I was more than a bit apprehensive when young Brian eagerly raised his hand and called out, “Ooh, ooh, I know, I know.” I was trapped, and so I had to carry on to the end. “Why do you suppose we put our hands on their heads, Brian?” Then Brian said words I shall never forget: “To remind them of their baptisms.”

That's not technically true, of course, but Brian had grasped a truth deeper than the fine points of liturgical practice. Brian knew that there is a sense in which we are all ordained to ministry in our baptism. Baptism is both God's gift of life and our calling to live in gratitude to God and love for neighbors. In baptism, we are enfolded by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, and we are summoned to a life of discipleship. Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4 are only the most obvious places where Scripture sets out the ministry to which all the baptized are called.

In baptism we are all "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11). In union with Christ, "we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us": prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, compassion, and more (Rom. 12:6-7). We are, together, "the body of Christ, and individually members of it," so we do not all have the same gifts (1 Cor. 12:27-31). Yet "each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift" in order "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:7,12). The ministry and mission of the whole church are participation in the one ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.

The church's ministry and mission are the calling of the whole people of God. In the Reformed tradition, ministry is not the domain of a particular group of people called "clergy," who lead a larger group called "laity." This un-Reformed clergy/lay distinction obscures the reality that all specific ministries of the church are particular expressions of the ministry of the whole body of Christ. All Christians are gifted for ministry, and so there is a real sense in which all are ordained to ministry in their baptisms. When I hear someone spoken of as a person "who has gifts for ministry," I am always tempted to say, "Well, of course! She is baptized."

### **Ordered Ministries**

Within the foundational ministry of the whole people of God, persons may be called to perform specific functions that are important to the life of particular communities of faith. Church school teachers, choir members, treasurers, cooks, ushers and greeters, gardeners, and others are called formally and informally, and exercise their gifts on behalf of the whole congregation. However, some ministries are considered to be *necessary* to the spiritual health and faithful life of *every* Christian community. The whole church gives order to these necessary functions by regularizing their shape, their duties, their qualifications, and their approval. These "ordered ministries," and the persons who are called to them, are grounded in Baptism and established in ordination – the whole church's act of setting apart for particular service.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), following the development of Reformed ecclesiology, ordains persons to three ordered ministries: deacon, elder, and minister. These three ministries represent two ecclesial functions: ministries of the Word and Sacrament performed by presbyters (pastors and elders) and ministries of service performed by deacons. Unfortunately, recent decades have seen the diminution of all

three ordered ministries, accompanied by their captivity to secular models of managerial organization.

The degrading of the diaconate came first. By the middle of the twentieth century, most deacons were organized into “boards” that were confined to carrying out compassionate tasks within the congregation, or restricted to stewardship of congregational finances. While these ministries are valuable, they are a constriction of John Calvin’s originating vision for the diaconal ministries of the church. In early Reformed ecclesiology and practice, deacons were church members who held ecclesial office as an essential component of the church’s ministry. Diaconal functions – care for the poor, sick, widows and orphans, refugees, and others in need – are the responsibility of all Christians, of course, but for Calvin, ordered deacons were charged with leading the whole church in ministries of mercy, service, and justice. Justice, as well as mercy and service, because care for the poor, sick, widows and orphans, refugees and others in need required the alleviation of pressing need *and* sustained action to address the causes of need, working for equity in society.

Today, many Presbyterian congregations have dispensed with deacons altogether, and few congregations have noticed the *Book of Order* provision that enables congregations to call and ordain persons to specific diaconal ministries without having a *board* of deacons.<sup>1</sup> Persons with particular gifts can be called to ministries of compassion, such as care for families in times of sickness or death; to ministries of service, such as refugee resettlement, food banks, or tutoring; and to ministries of justice, such as workers’ equity and adequate provision for citizens with mental retardation. Yet many congregations have dispensed with deacons because the constriction of their role, combined with the petty organizational requirements of “board” meetings, made it difficult to convince people to serve, and frustrating for those who did serve.

The diminution of elders and the attenuation of ministers have proceeded hand in hand. It is both a symptom and a cause of their reduced roles that the church has abandoned the traditional titles “teaching elder,” and “ruling elder” in favor of “minister of the Word and sacrament” and simply “elder.” The first loss in this terminological switch has been the fading away of the essential inter-relatedness of these two ordered ministries. In the Reformed tradition, both are “presbyters,” and neither exercises ministry apart from the other. The second loss has been the marginalization of the pastoral calling to be a “teacher of the faith.” Identifying ministers by their teaching role emphasizes the primacy of the Word and the centrality of the “teaching church.” The saddest loss, however, has been the bureaucratization of the ministry of elders. The designation *ruling* elder is easily misunderstood. The historic understanding of the “ruling” exercised by elders has far less to do with managerial governance than with *ruling out* or *measuring* the work of ministry, the fidelity of communal and personal lives, and the progress of the gospel in the church. *Ruling* elders are *discerning* elders, partners with teaching elders in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Today, in far too many congregations, pastors act as managers of an organization, working to rationalize mission, enhance efficiency, and increase market share. Elders act

as a board of directors, reviewing and approving management's strategy and programs, and monitoring financial and property assets. Our current situation in the church is light years removed from the originating vision. In the Reformed tradition, presbyters – teaching and ruling elders – meeting together in sessions, presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies, are to act as “good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). Their mutual calling is to ensure clear proclamation of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, and to nurture congregational fidelity to God's new Way in the world.

Calvin's plurality of ordered ministries sought to break open the ministry of the whole people of God, giving visible form to the “priesthood of all believers” while protecting the church against the potential abuses of clericalism. The three ordered ministries were bound together in the common task of ensuring the church's fidelity to the Word. Their current separation diminishes all three while depriving the whole people of God of the faithful leadership it needs in order to fulfill its ministry fully and faithfully.

## **Ordination**

Ordination to one of the church's ordered ministries is not the simple recognition that a person possesses “gifts for ministry,” or that a particular office suits a person's abilities. Neither does ordination follow naturally from a person's “sense of call.” Ordination is certainly not about access to position, influence, and power in the church. Instead, ordination is the church's act of recognizing the movement of the Holy Spirit in the interactions among the church's ordering of ministries, its standards for these ministries, and its current needs, together with prayerful discernment by persons, congregations, and presbyteries.

I recently had an opportunity to review applications for service on a national committee of the church. A large number of applicants mentioned their conviction that they were “called” to serve on the committee – many more than the size of the committee. (Can this explain Jesus' enigmatic saying, “Many are called but few are chosen”?) My experience in reviewing applications from a too-large number of people who feel called by God is not unique. It is clearly the case that a person's inner sense of call is an insufficient means for discerning the reality of God's call. Together with most Christian churches, Reformed churches have always insisted that there are four parties to any call to ministry: God, a person, the whole church, and a congregation (or other form of ecclesial ministry). God is always the prime caller, of course, but other parties to the call may appear in any order. Sometimes the person's sense of God's call comes first, but sometimes the call originates from a congregation, or through the whole church.

In the contemporary Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), God's call to the church's ordered ministry is often collapsed into an individual's inner sense of call, so that a person's assertion of call is taken to trump all else: “How can the church deny ordination to someone God has called?” people often say, as if an expression of personal conviction is the only evidence needed. Calvin characterized an individual's sense of call as the

“secret call,” that could only be known as true through the “outward and solemn call” that concerned the “public order of the church.”<sup>2</sup> Because ordered ministries are not private forms of service but rather the *ordered* ministries of *the church*, the church sets forth qualifications and criteria that shape both personal and ecclesial evaluation of an inner sense of call. But even this is not sufficient, for there must finally be a call to a specific ministry that comes from a particular community of faith.

We may begin to sort out our confusion about call by comparing the way we think about call to the ministry of Word and Sacrament and the way we think about call to the ministry of deacon. In the former, the call usually originates in the individual; in the latter it usually originates in the congregation. Persons indicate their sense of call to become a pastor, but persons rarely indicate their sense of call to the diaconate. Congregations usually call persons to diaconal ministry, but [these days] congregations infrequently indicate their sense that persons are called to pastoral ministry. Does this mean that God has different methods for calling to different ministries of the church? Or does it mean that we have privatized ministry of Word and Sacrament while losing an understanding of deacons and elders as *ministers* of the church?

A person’s sense of call may be mistaken, a congregation’s call may be misguided, and the whole church’s standards and criteria of call may be misshapen. It is only as all parties to call are functioning in concert that genuine discernment of call can occur. There is a particular precedence at work however. All persons are called to ministry in their baptisms, but only some are called to the *ordered* ministries of the church. Thus, the whole church’s *ordering* of its ministries – educational, doctrinal, behavioral, and ecclesial ordering – circumscribes the calling of persons and the calling by congregations to those ordered ministries.

Recognizing the precedence of the *church’s* call over a *person’s* call may begin to sort out current confusion over “examinations” for ordination. What are we examining persons for? Meaningful examination of elders and deacons disappeared long ago, and meaningful examination of candidates for ministry of Word and Sacrament is occasional at best. Current efforts to strengthen examination procedures for presbytery assessment of candidates must be accompanied by the strengthening of examination procedures for session examination of persons nominated for ordination as elders and deacons. The purpose of examinations is not suspicious testing, but rather discernment – discerning alignment of the church’s doctrinal, behavioral, and ecclesial standards, the congregation’s needs, and the person’s faith and beliefs.

Ordination is a gift that Christ gives, not a right asserted by individuals, claimed by groups, or promised by the church. The “spiritual welfare of the church” depends, in large measure, upon our recovery of an understanding of the ministry of the whole people of God, the ordered ministries of the church, and Christ’s gift of ordination.

<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Order*, G-6.0403b. (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ford Lewis battles, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 4.3.11., p. 1062f.