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THE MEANING OF ORDINATION: A MODEST PROPOSAL

Stanley K. Fowler

Many Baptists (and others) are taking time in 1992 to remember the work of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher who died exactly 100 years ago. One aspect of his ministry which is unknown to many is the fact that he never received ecclesiastical ordination. I remember that this fact was pointed out to me years ago by one of my pastors, who commented that Spurgeon viewed ordination as the imposition of "empty hands on empty heads." When I later read Spurgeon's sermon on 1 Tim 4:14, I realized that his rejection of ordination was based on much more than a witty comment containing more truth than we may want to admit. In point of fact, his argument was that New Testament examples of ordination (*e.g.*, the ordination of Timothy) refer to the actual bestowal of spiritual gifts through apostolic hands, which may be acceptable to modern Anglicans and Roman Catholics, but is not the meaning of ordination in the Baptist tradition. For Spurgeon, therefore, the New Testament ritual is not the same thing as the modern Baptist ritual, and thus the former can hardly serve as the basis for the latter.

The confusion in Baptist thinking about ordination did not end in Spurgeon's day. In fact, there is significant confusion and difference of opinion among evangelical Baptists in Canada today. It would appear to me that the major reason why young Baptist pastors in my circles accept ordination is that it provides a licence to conduct weddings. The irony in all this is that ecclesiastical ordination serves primarily to make one an agent of the state! Within my own denomination (The Fellowship of Evangelical Baptist Churches in Canada), there are regional differences in attitudes toward ordination: it tends to have less significance as one moves from east to west.

Perhaps, then, it is time to take another look at our practice of ordination, and to ask whether it is Biblical, extra-Biblical, unbiblical, or some combination of the above. The current practice in my own circles is roughly this: Ordination is a public recognition that a man is gifted and called by God for pastoral ministry. It recognizes, but does not convey, God's gifts of grace which empower for such ministry. It normally occurs after a few years of pastoral service, not at its inception. It is an act of the congregation which the man is serving, but the process includes an ordination council called by the church. This council is composed of pastors and laypersons from other churches within the denomination, who question the candidate on his conversion, call to ministry, and doctrinal convictions. The council recommends (usually) that the church proceed, and the formal ordination occurs in another service, in which there is a ritual laying on of hands by congregational leaders, ordained members of the council, or a combination of the two. How does this correlate with New Testament teaching and examples?

1. The term “ordain”

The word “ordain” in the church context is a word of the AV. Modern English versions simply do not use the term in relation to church office, and even in the AV it does not occur frequently. The AV uses “ordain” in the context of appointment to the service of Christ only six times, and these six occurrences represent five different Greek words. Mark 3:14 uses ποιέω to describe Jesus’ appointment of the twelve to be apostles, sent by him on a preaching mission. John 15:16 gives us Jesus’ statement to the apostles about his appointment of them, and uses τίθημι. Acts 1:22 narrates the appointment of a replacement for Judas Iscariot, and in this case “ordain” is used to translate γίνομαι. In Acts 14:23, Luke describes the appointment of elders by Paul and Barnabas by means of the Greek χειροτονέω. Paul’s appointment as an apostle is described in 1 Tim 1:7, using τίθημι. Finally, the appointment of elders by Titus is mentioned by Paul in Titus 1:5, utilizing καθίστημι.

It soon becomes obvious in this survey of usage that there is no technical term for “ordination” in the New Testament. What we have instead are various words denoting appointment or installation. The word has taken on a technical sense for us due to its current usage, but this does not match the New Testament pattern. Therefore, if one is going to argue that our present practice is mandated by Scripture, the argument will have to be based on examples or principles, not on terminology.

It is also clear that in Biblical terms, “ordination” is meaningless apart from a specific object. In other words, one is ordained *to be something*, whether an apostle, an elder, or some other kind of servant of God’s kingdom. “To be ordained” is an incomplete idea in Biblical terms. This should be kept in mind in the current debate about the role of women in ministry. One ought not ask, “Should women be ordained?” The question is, ordained to what?

Furthermore, each of the relevant Biblical texts uses “ordain” to describe the entrance into a particular ministry, not some form of recognition which occurs only after a period of probation. Indeed, each of the Greek words translated “ordain” is very broad in its meaning, but each denotes the introduction into a state of affairs, not a later confirmation of it. In New Testament terms, when a church appoints a man as pastor, that church has “ordained” him to be a pastor.

2. Appointment rituals in the New Testament

There are only a few references in the Bible to the actual way in which individuals were formally set apart for particular ministries. Acts 6:6 refers to the appointment of seven men to assist the apostles by serving the Hellenistic widows in the Jerusalem church. The church selected the men,

after which the apostles prayed for them and laid hands on them. Acts 13:3 describes the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas for their evangelistic mission. This action involved fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands, and the subjects of this action were either the “prophets and teachers” or the members of the church in general. Paul refers to the appointment of Timothy in both letters to his associate (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). The event included the laying on of hands by Paul and the elders of Timothy’s church, as well as prophecies about Timothy.

There is in these illustrations no fixed pattern for an appointment ritual, either by way of command or consistent example. Laying on hands is common to all three examples, but two mention prayer, one mentions fasting, and one mentions prophecy. The act of appointment sometimes involves apostles, but not exclusively. It should also be noted that the ritual in Acts 6 concerns a ministry of serving, not the ministry of the Word.

The implication of this must be that formal rituals of induction to service may be appropriate for a variety of church ministries, including but not limited to induction to pastoral ministry. The form of the ritual is not prescribed by Scripture, although prayer is clearly appropriate and the traditional imposition of hands demonstrates a continuity with the people of God throughout history.

3. Application to the present situation

The most fundamental implication of the Biblical data is that in New Testament terms, *appointment equals “ordination.”* When the members of a church vote to appoint a man as pastor, they have “ordained” him. Perhaps an awareness of this would create a more serious attitude toward such a vote. Perhaps this would even suggest the wisdom of calling an “ordination council” of sorts before appointment to solicit the wisdom of leaders from other churches, in the same way that such advice is now sought at a later date.

A formal service of induction/ordination is certainly fitting, but, contrary to current practice in my own circles, it would seem most fitting for this to occur at the first service at which the new pastor ministers, not weeks or months later. The form of such a service is not prescribed by the Bible, and may be structured in a way that is culturally appropriate.

Finally, if I am right in arguing that what we Baptists call “ordination” is not really what the New Testament means by that term, then we ought to admit that *our practice is actually a granting of denominational credentials*, which may be justified on pragmatic grounds. This is really implicit in the practice of the ordination council drawn from other congregations, not to mention the common wording of the letter calling the council, which refers to the act as a setting apart for ministry “among the people called Baptists.”

Now if in fact what we are doing is granting denominational credentials, *i.e.*, affirming in a formal way that a certain person is gifted for pastoral work and doctrinally suitable for our group of churches, it would seem reasonable

to make this action a truly denominational action. This would involve the creation of denominational structures to examine candidates and give an assessment of their suitability, which would, in my opinion, be an improvement over our present system which is somewhat haphazard and not standardized. Within my own fellowship, this could be done either at a national or regional level. Conceivably the two could be combined by having a regional committee recommend candidates to a national body with the final authority.

Does this threaten the autonomy of the local church and its freedom to call its own pastors? Not necessarily. Churches could still be free to appoint pastors without such credentials, even though there is something to be said for wisdom from the outside. In any case, it is hard to see how a denominational credentials committee violates autonomy any more than an ordination council. In either case, the local church willingly accepts the collective wisdom of the people of God. This does, after all, have the support of the Apostle Paul, who twice invokes the consensus of the churches in his argument with the Corinthian church (1 Cor 11:16; 14:33-34).

It is easy to assume that the way we do things is clearly the Biblical way of doing it, perhaps on the basis of merely superficial connections between our practice and certain Biblical texts. It seems that some of our Baptist assumptions about ordination need to be rethought and refined. The assessment and appointment of the leaders who will shape the faith and practice of the Church is too important to be trivialized by assuming that the way we now do it is obviously the best way to do it.

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