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A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ibs-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php)

Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the NT? /1

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The NT writers do not appear to know any "ministry" which is not, or is not bound up with, the ministry of the Word. /2 The very documents that give us the story of Jesus, are labelled "Gospels" where "gospel" (euangelion) is a dynamic term, implying within itself the act of proclamation. They constitute, if we like, a "ministry" of the Word. It is this word proclaimed that evokes faith. Such "believers" are admitted through baptism to the church, the body of Christ. They are called upon to witness to the world the saving grace of Christ, proclaiming the same word by which they themselves have been transformed.

The Reformed church can speak of the "ministry of the Word and Sacraments". While ministry in the NT is closely bound up with the proclamation of the word, it must be confessed that such NT ministry is not necessarily linked with the administration of the sacraments.

In the Gospels, it is Jesus who "ministers" (or the disciples sent out on mission by Jesus). The Twelve are designated "apostles" (apostoloi) in the synoptic gospels but not in John (cf however John 13.16). They are "called" as Jesus pleases (Mk 3.13 and pars), to be with him, to preach, expel demons and heal (Mk 3.14,15;6.13;Lk 9.2). In Luke we are told of two missions, one to the Twelve (9.1f), often interpreted as the mission to Israel, and one to Gentiles, that of the Seventy (10.1ff). While the Twelve are called "apostles" in Luke (6.13), we are not given this description for the Seventy. The main elements, descriptive of their ministry, are preaching, exorcism and healing (Mk 3.14,15;Lk 9.2;Mt 10.7,8). The Twelve leave their usual occupations and give themselves over to Jesus (Mk 1.16-20 and pars;Lk 5.11;cf Lk 9.57-61). Though they may occasionally be forced to take up their former work, their main task is to follow/

Notes 1. This paper was prepared for discussion in the Committee of Doctrine, Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

2. Cf 1 Tim 5.17; Tit 1.9

Jesus and be with him (cf Jn 21.1ff)

The Twelve share in the breaking of bread and, as such, become representatives of the New Israel. There is, however, no hint that they alone are to dispense the "Sacrament". They are told to make disciples of all nations, and to baptize, but we are not to assume that they are the only members of the church who have authority to baptize. Mission and within it necessarily baptism belong to the whole church. We note that there is no command to repeat the observance of the "Lord's Supper" in the Gospels. (The longer text of Lk includes it but it is omitted by the NEB and RSV as not part of the original text). In John's Gospel there is no clear mention of the "sacrament" though it may be implied (Ch.6; cf 13.1ff)

It is notable that there is an infrequent use of "apostles" in Mark (6.30) and Matthew (10.2). Luke however uses the term more frequently ie on six occasions (6.13;9.10;11.49;17.5;22.14;24.10). It is he who has the phrase "whom he named apostles" (6.13 assimilated to Mk 3.14), and thus appears to make it a title or an office ie it becomes more institutional. This is confirmed by his usage in Acts.

The pattern of Jesus' ministry in the Gospels, then, reveals a ministry of proclamation of the good news, of healing and exorcism, but it is not clear if it includes a ministry of the sacraments. The pattern of Jesus, presiding at the meal, could very well be that for the primitive church.

In Acts, Luke appears to restrict the description "apostles" to the Twelve (cf however 14.14 where we find its only use for Paul and Barnabas and, it is claimed, not in its technical sense). The importance of the Twelve apostles is brought out by the appointment of Matthias to fill the place vacated by Judas (1.21). Has this to do with the wholeness of the New Israel and the unity of its ranks? We may note the qualifications of Matthias - one who was in company with Jesus since his baptism, and one who is a witness of the resurrection. We are not told a great deal about the Twelve except Peter./

He is supremely a preacher of the word and a leader in the counsels of the church. Paul, though not seen clearly as an apostle, is also prominent as a preacher of the word by his speeches and the nature of his missionary activity. It is this word which builds up the church, and increases its membership under the power of the Holy Spirit. Healing and pastoral care are also linked up with this preaching of the word (Acts 20.28). Even if seven men are chosen to minister to the widows of Hellenistic Jews who are in necessitous circumstances the main activity in Acts of at least two of these men, Stephen and Philip, is preaching. Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts while Philip is a most successful evangelist in Samaria.

The "Seven", however, do appear to be subordinate in ministry to the apostles. Philip's mission in Samaria brought many converts, but it is only when Peter and John come down to pray and lay on hands that they receive the Holy Spirit (8.14ff). Authority can be interpreted as centred in the Jerusalem church, and this comes out especially in the matter of admission of the Gentiles. Peter reports to the Jerusalem church the events which led up to the baptism of Cornelius - vision, coincidence, and the descent of the Spirit (Chs 10 and 11). It is the Jerusalem church also which decides the terms on which the Gentiles may be admitted (15.1ff). The Jerusalem Council is made up of "apostles and elders". We are not told how the elders were appointed (cf, however, Acts 20.17ff) but they act with the apostles and the whole church in the decision (15.22f).

The authoritative position of James presents a problem. It is probably right to associate it with his relationship to Jesus but he, too, would have been filled with the Holy Spirit (espec if, as is not unlikely, he was one of the 120 in Acts 1.15), and have had charismatic gifts. Whatever the explanation, he exercises considerable authority (12.17; 15.13; 21.18). We are nowhere told that he preaches or that, as Paul tells us, he is an apostle (1 Cor 15.3ff). It is interesting that he does not emerge into the forefront until Peter is put in prison. Was he given authority on Peter's instruction? (Acts 12.17)? Later, when Paul reports to Jerusalem, James, and not Peter, is mentioned (21.18). Thus Acts tells us the secret of the church's advance - the word preached in the power of the Spirit. If/

certain men take on tasks of administration and charity, this takes place within the believing community, and those who administer are also preachers of the word. There is, however, no hint of any ministry outside that of the word.

What about the sacraments in Acts? We are told that the whole believing community "devoted themselves...to the breaking of bread" (2.42), that they broke bread in their homes (2.46), but we are given no hint as to who presided nor any clear evidence that this is the sacrament. It is in this connection that we get the only mention of the "apostles' teaching", to which the community devotes itself (2.42) i.e. the function of the apostle was to preach and teach. They have naturally an authoritative position as teachers since they were Jesus' disciples, taught by him, and witnessed his death and resurrection. As for baptism, we find Philip and Ananias baptizing and we may well ask, too, whether only apostles would be responsible for baptizing the numerous converts on the day of Pentecost and after.

Thus in Acts the ministry is a ministry of the word. The leaders of the church are apostles who possess the Holy Spirit, have been taught by Jesus, and witnessed his resurrection. Others are associated with them in leadership e.g. James, the elders, the latter probably an appointment by the apostles in which the church would share (cf 14.23). Healings and exorcisms are linked with the preaching of the word (8.7).

The letters of Paul could hardly emphasize more strongly the link between the ministry and proclamation. Paul insists in vehement terms that both his commission and his gospel are the result of divine revelation and that no man had a part in it (Gal 1.1,12). This "gospel" is God's power for salvation to everyone who has faith. As a result of this proclamation churches have been founded. But Paul's responsibility did not cease there but by letter and visit he is concerned to build them up in the faith. Thus we have elements of call, commission, pastoral care and/

discipline. He, too, has seen the risen Lord (1 Cor 9.1; 15.8) and is thus a witness to the resurrection.

Yet Paul does not leave his churches without leadership when he is away. He speaks to the Thess of "those who labour among you and admonish you" (1 Th 4.12) and, presumably, this kind of leadership would be established in all his churches. Yet it does not come to the forefront as it might do, in his proposed excommunication of a moral offender. There the whole church gather, with Paul present in spirit, and without any mention of leaders, expel the offender (1 Cor 5.4ff). It is unusual to find the mention of "bishops and deacons" (Phil 1.1) in Paul's early letters. The Philippian church had organized gifts for Paul, and it is possible these were appointed to "oversee" and "serve" in this connection. Whatever may be the explanation, they are not mentioned again in the letter but Paul addresses the whole church (1.4,7,8,25;2.25). What these men do is not done apart from the church but something done within the church and for the church and its upbuilding. If Paul speaks of distinctions in function or gift between apostles, prophets, teachers, speakers in various kinds of tongues, it is all in relation to the gifts of the Spirit. They are thus not thought of institutionally but charismatically. They are not native gifts but freely bestowed gifts of the Spirit.

The Pastoral letters are often assumed to be non-Pauline but they are "Pauline" in their emphasis on the ministry of the Word. Paul writes to Timothy and Titus in a personal vein, to carry out his teaching (1 Tim 1.18;4.11f) and preaching (1 Tim 4.13). They are responsible for appointing elders in the church who preach, teach and rule and are paid for it (1 Tim 5.17ff). It is evident that the ordination of Timothy is charismatic, resulting from a prophetic utterance that pointed to him (1 Tim 1.18) and linked up with the laying on of hands whether of Paul or elders with him (1 Tim 4.14;2 Tim 1.6). In his list of spiritual gifts Paul includes "gifts of healing" (1 Cor 12.1ff) and faith ie both preaching and healing are linked up with the Word.

What about the sacraments? Paul can express his relief in a divisive situation, that he has not done much baptizing (1 Cor 1.17). It has been left to others. Baptism, however, was important to Paul (Romans 6) but he does not/

restrict its administration to any specific official that we can find. His form of observance of the Lord's Supper he received from the Lord though it is not clear whether it was through human channels eg Ananias of Damascus (cf 1 Cor.11.23). There is no reference to the Lord's Supper or baptism in the Pastorals (cf however Titus 3.1). Paul appears to have a freer understanding of 'apostle' than Luke including eg Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16.7) and this freer approach could apply to the administration of the sacraments.

Other NT writings do not alter this general view that any NT ministry is that of the Word. In the Fourth Gospel we find no mention of 'apostle' or of Jesus' actual baptism or of the institution of the Supper. John does not appear to be concerned with structure or who may preside. The Holy Spirit leads into all truth ie flexibility in relation to structures would follow? The 'elder' in the Johannine epistles (2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1) does exercise a certain pastoral and instructive role and as such fits into the general pattern of the ministry of the word. In Revelation there is no interest in church order. The whole church is given the description "kings" and "priests" to God (1.6; 5.10) and it is probably right to say that the church is presented as "guided spiritually and prophetically rather than according to fixed offices."

/3 In 1 Peter each member possesses the gift of grace (4.10) through which he speaks and serves (4.11). The tasks of the elders, as in Paul, are pastoral, administrative and disciplinary, "tending eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

This investigation has shown that, whatever flexibility there may be in the designation of the leaders of the early church, all the NT writings are united in their emphasis that the leaders, whether apostles, elders, or even deacons, should preach the Word. However occasional the NT writings, however specific the situations they address, they are all united on one point - any ministry that is not a ministry of the word is hardly ministry in any true sense