

ORDINATION: WHO AND WHOM

Virgil Warren, PhD

Ordination to the ministry involves three issues: (1) the understanding of New Testament offices and ministry, (2) the New Testament meaning of ordination, and (3) the meaning attached to ordination by the state.

I. Who should be ordained?

From the standpoint of the church, the restoration movement has set aside the clerical concept. Consequently, ordination does not validate a person's ministry. It does not bestow the right to preach or "administer sacraments." The only ordination observed in the New Testament is an appointment to specific tasks. Ordination in the traditional sense is not seen, then, as a New Testament concept. It has been practiced among Christian churches/churches of Christ simply to commend an individual to the general Christian community. It indicates that in the estimation of the ordaining congregation the person has the character, abilities, and skills appropriate to the ministry of the word. That has been sufficient to qualify him also for the rights given to religious leaders by the state. So ordination has been a matter of expediency rather than necessity.

From the standpoint of the state, the only purpose for ordination is to authorize ministers to perform weddings in the name of the state. (Many states do not even require ordination for this role; being regarded as a minister is often sufficient. There is a benefit to ordination, namely, exemption from federal income tax on housing allowance; but that is not a reason for ordination.) It is appropriate and helpful if a minister can meet this traditional expectancy because it provides a natural opportunity to identify marriage with Christian values and with the Christian community. People then who labor in the Lord even full time but do not function in this role have no reason to be ordained in the traditional sense of the term.

As far as commendation to the brotherhood is concerned, there is some overlap between New Testament official ministry and the government's recognition of ordination. The office of evangelist is the only New Testament office that correlates with what the government recognizes as an object of ordination. Lord, apostle, and prophet are specially gifted general offices that have no successors (except possibly for prophets if special revelation and/or guidance continues). Elder and deacon are local offices not normally practiced as vocations. Other responsibilities that are general in scope are regarded as some aspect of the evangelist office. In other words, when we combine our understanding of ministry with the government's understanding of it, ordination in the traditional sense naturally applies only to men in general office who labor in the ministry of the word. Ordination naturally applies then to evangelists, preachers, and missionaries, which are different manifestations of the New Testament evangelist.

Moving official ordination beyond men in general offices for the ministry of the word passes any natural limit on who could be ordained. It would allow for ordaining (1) all those vocationally involved in Christian work--with or without formal preparation. We

could ordain all members of churches' multiple staffs (Christain education directors, music ministers, children's ministers, ministers of worship, business directors, secretaries, custodians) as well as all participants in parachurch agencies (Bible college faculty regardless of subject area, house parents in Christian orphanages, publishing personnel) and everyone whose livelihood comes from church-related services (traveling musicians, artists, church builders). That clearly pushes the practice beyond its intended scope. Obviously we cannot add (2) all those who "minister." In theory that would make every Christian eligible for ordination in the traditional sense.

The issue in traditional ordination is not whether someone is making a vital contribution to the body. Every member has a vital role (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:15-16): those also serve who attend the baggage (1 Samuel 30:24). The issue is what kind of vital contribution a person is making. If we "ordain" in the traditional sense, then we need to ordain

"ministry" in the traditional sense—even though for our own purposes we do not view ministers in exactly that sense. If we broaden the term "ordination" from technical to general usage, it should not include any purpose or benefit associated with the state--wedding performance and housing-allowance deduction. If we want to recognize those set aside to every church role—a good practice already done informally in other connections, then we should probably call it something else.

A final question about ordination is whether women may be ordained. The answer, of course, depends on a person's understanding of the relevant New Testament texts cross-culturally adjusted. Until recently the standard position among evangelicals has been that God has assigned men the responsibility of official ministry of the word in mixed settings. "Preachers" typically do more than speak publicly even though preaching includes testimony, encouragement, and "prophesying"—public roles performed by men and women alike in the New Testament. Preachers also teach the word in sermons and elsewhere and administer the church program either under the local leaders or with them. Their standard responsibilities include work that God has given men. In keeping with this judgment about New Testament leadership and these expectancies of "the minister," ordination of women would not be appropriate.

II. Who ordains?

In the free-church tradition the local church is the only entity with any ecclesiastical standing. There are no general offices above the congregation that can speak to or for it. Consequently, ordination is done by local churches rather than by a synod, session, association, presbytery, and the like. Congregational government allows for parachurch agencies like Bible colleges, seminaries, evangelistic associations, publishing companies, benevolence organizations, mission agencies, *etc.* But these organizations are not part of the church organizationally speaking; they are entities formed by groups of individuals to carry on a particular ministry. They are typically

constituted under boards of trustees recognized by the state to operate with the benefit of tax-exempt status.

In conclusion, then, when a person asks to be ordained, several questions are implied in that request which have to be considered before granting it.

- (1) What do you mean by "ordain"?
- (2) Why do you want to be ordained?
- (3) What New Testament office do you want to be ordained to?
- (4) Does ordination in the traditional sense apply to the ministry you intend to perform?
- (5) In the case of women, does ordination in the traditional sense apply to the roles the New Testament includes in the work you propose to do?