

COMMENTS ON ORDINATION

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Across Christendom ordination has had a variety of meanings. The most extreme position has been that (1) ordination validates the “administration” of sacraments. Unless a duly qualified clergyman presides, the sacrament is invalid in much the same way that a wedding performed by a person “off the street” would not be recognized by the state. A Justice of the Peace must be duly appointed to perform wedding ceremonies as an agent of the state. In this view, ordination is for theological reasons. The clergy concept is part of the larger idea that grace flows through the church, that is, through those who validly stand as executors of divine administration. It is a legal conceptualization like that of Justice of the Peace, validity being based on “apostolic succession.” Legal administration of grace, however, is a contradiction of terms.

A more restricted view says that (2) ordination protects from mis-practice in holy things. The validity of the administration does not depend on the validity of ordination, but for practical reasons only ordained ministers preside at the Lord’s table and perform baptisms.

Christian ordinances, however, are not more dependent on clergy than preaching the gospel is, even under concern for propriety. From a theological standpoint, ordinances are interpersonal in character, not legal. Consequently, there is no required licensing and ordaining of ministers. So, if a minister offers to work with a congregation, it is doubtful that the congregation should ask whether he is ordained.

Another view is that ordination (3) makes a statement to the brotherhood at large that the sending congregation recommends this person from its midst as one with Christian character, appropriate ministry skills, and acceptable doctrinal perspectives. Such ordination does not validate his ministry; it indicates recommendation by a congregation.

A final approach sees ordination as a gesture that (4) appoints to a specific task as long as the person is performing in that role. When he leaves it for another task, the ordination does not go with him. Ordination is task specific.

Aside from a statement about character and qualifications (#3), about the only reason people would seek ordination is to enable them to perform wedding ceremonies validly (and even that privilege does not require religious ordination). That is a state matter, because marriage is not an institution of the church (a sacrament) but an institution of society. Many states do not require ministerial ordination for performing weddings; the minister must be “recognized” as a minister. Another benefit is financial because the United States government does make ministerial housing allowance non-taxable. These last two elements in ordination have nothing to do with Christian ministry. They are vestiges of largely bygone days when citizens regarded clergy in heightened terms because of the authority they were viewed as having in religious matters.

Ordination is practiced with elders and deacons in the local congregation, but that is concept #4. In the eyes of the state and the church, it does not validate being an agent of the state in performing weddings—although that right has been loosened in more recent decades. If such persons move to another congregation, they do not take their ordination with them.

Ordination is done only by congregations, because ecclesiologically that is the “highest” level of the body of Christ on earth today. Local autonomy in the free-church tradition has no super-congregational entity to license or ordain. Parachurch agencies are not part of the

organization of the church collect. They are entities incorporated by individuals under the state for tax purposes to provide services not considered manageable by one congregation. Ordination is not done by such agencies: mission agencies, benevolent agencies, educational institutions, Christian counseling services. Being taken on staff amounts to the only “ordination” there is.

In our culture, for a person to say he is “ordained” sounds like concept #1 and #2 or perhaps #3. It sounds more prestigious than it really is since biblical precedents do not carry ordination past concept #3 to #1 or #2.

Ordination of women is a function of yet another issue: the New Testament’s range of role relationships between husbands and wives in the home and in the church. Appointment to specific tasks (#4) raises no issue about a woman’s doing would be natural, but that would hardly be what “ordination” would mean in a typical statement: “*She is ordained.*” It is questionable whether New Testament comments about men-women (especially husband-wife) role relationship simply reflect first-century culture among Jews and Gentiles.

The issue is too complex to handle as part of the ordination issue. A couple points do seem clear. The structure of the church must be compatible with the structure of the home. Since home and church cover the full range of life issues, they both operate at the level of the whole. That the husband has final responsibility for the operation and success of home seems clear. To reverse this by putting a wife ahead of her husband in religious affairs in the church seems to conflict with his responsibility at home, that is, in the family. At least the most ultimate responsibilities in the church belong to husbands, it would seem. We are not forgetting here that by and large the day-to-day functioning of home, business, church, and the like, goes forward as much as possible through interpersonal influence and mutual respect. But in group activity authority to fulfill group responsibility is superimposed on purely interpersonal operations for the sake of efficiency, order, or resolution in cases of differing opinions about procedure.

As regards ordination, then, it would not seem natural to ordain (in traditional terms) women to final leadership ministry in the church. That would specifically put them “above” their husbands. If it were just a matter of public speaking, it would not be particularly an issue, depending on how it was done. We have biblical precedent for such activity. But ministry (hence traditional ordination) involves a broader range of operations than public exhortation and encouragement. As practiced today at least, ministry includes administrative and doctrinal decisions, which means needing to exercise authority over general membership. It approaches the role of elder, and many congregations include the minister as one of the elders after he has served with the church for a time.

Hopefully these thoughts will prove useful in thinking through the matters involved.