

H. Giesbrecht

THE LIBRARY OF THE
MENNONITE BRETHREN BIBLE COLLEGE
77 HENDERSON HWY., WINNIPEG 8

110-11
Box-5
Folder-11

March 5-6, 1970

THE COMMISSIONING OF SERVANTS IN THE CHURCH

It is no surprise that with the recent studies on the nature and the mission of the church there should be an accompanying reevaluation of the place of ministers within the church. Arnold B. Come in his book, "Agents of Reconciliation", argues that the entire practice of ordination needs to be reformed. Walter Klassen recently has noted that the universal priesthood, a concept revived in the Reformation, has not yet been taken seriously in the church in any widespread way.¹ In this connection certain questions are definitely in the air: Does not the doctrine of the priesthood of believers invalidate an order or even an office of the ministry? If every Christian is a minister, why should some Christians be ordained to a special, life-long task? Does the Bible set forth an irrevocable form of entrance into the ministry, or only a basic principle with elasticity for application in a particular era? What is the relation of ordination to the concept of Christian vocation?

These and similar questions goad us to a timely consideration of the basic concern about the manner in which spiritual leadership is called into action in the local congregation. In one sense the debate concerning ordination "begins at the point at which we set about to determine through what precise channels the divine sanction and (in a less degree) the divine enabling should be conveyed."² Within our own Anabaptist tradition this formulation of the problem may sound too much like the sacramentarian view; however, it is right for us to ask how servants in the church receive the authorization to perform their ministries.

In order to set a platform for discussion we shall consider, first, the biblical foundations of ordination, and second, the extension of the principles for the life of the church in history and for our day.

I. A QUEST FOR THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF ORDINATION

There are three possible approaches to such a study - the exegetical, the theological, and the ecclesiastical. The last-named approach sees the matter as referring to the accepted pattern of law and order within a church. The theological angle treats the rite of ordination in the context of the doctrine, worship, and ministry of the church in keeping with the accepted theological confessions of faith. The exegetical approach, which will be followed in this present section, aims to treat seriously the New Testament witness as an objective starting point for the study. Only in a cursory way

CENTER FOR M. B. STUDIES IN CANADA
77 HENDERSON HIGHWAY
WINNIPEG, MANITOBA R2L 1L1

will we treat the terminology of the Old Testament in which the laying on of hands is seen in several types of situations.

As the major concern of this paper we shall formulate a question as follows: By what methods were ministerial functions acquired according to the New Testament teaching and practice?

A. Commissioning by the Father

The one basic ministry is that of Christ Himself. The writer to the Hebrews enjoins his readers to "consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus" (Hebrews 3:1). Though this is the only place in the New Testament where the word 'apostle' is used as applied to Jesus, it presents clearly the fact that Jesus was one sent from the Father. Again, Jesus is called the "bishop of your souls" (I Peter 2:25). Ministers may be called 'pastors' but there is only one good Shepherd. He is also the teacher (Matthew 8:19) and the High Priest (Hebrews 9:26). Specially important is his ministry of service. "Jesus Christ was a dia-konos of the circumcision for the truth of God" (Romans 15:8). He Himself said, "I am among you as he that serveth" (Luke 22:27). Into this manifold ministry Jesus stepped via the baptism experience in which the Spirit of God descended upon him like a dove, and the Father's voice declared, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:13-17). It may be safely concluded that no other was sent like Jesus, nor authorized for the sacred work as He. In this our Savior stands unique.

B. Commissioning by Christ

Here we speak of a ministry acquired directly from Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Ye have ^{not} chosen me, but I have chosen you and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain" (John 15:16). As those who were with Jesus they were to preach, and cast out demons. In a real sense they were the 'apostles of Christ' (2 Corinthians 11:13). No human ordination is mentioned. Either Christ made a man an apostle or he did not. The apostle was chosen not by a body of believers, but by Christ Himself. Even Matthias was designated by the Lord (Acts 1:15-26). None of the apostles received their responsibility and authority "through men" (Galatians 1:1). There is no evidence that they could transmit their position, or office or function to others. We can therefore speak of the apostles' pupils, but not of their successors in office.

The men whom God chose, though called apostles, were also spoken of as the "twelve disciples" (Matthew 10:1). As learners these men had

no position of greatness or office; rather, they were to learn in all humility. Thus it is possible to regard the Twelve not as a ministry, but a society in embryo.³ Eduard Schweitzer argues emphatically: "But of that group of disciples, as a school for Church leaders there was certainly never any thought."⁴ Jesus chose seventy but this does not mean that the Seventy formed a ministry; they were simply selected for a special piece of service. The power to forgive or retain sin was a gift given to the Church as a whole (John 20).

Paul, like the Twelve, was chosen and appointed directly by the Lord. He and they stood in such relationship to the Lord as did no other of His followers. Paul made clear that his apostolate was not in the slightest degree inferior to that of others.

In summary, neither with the Twelve or in Paul's case is there indication of an ceremony of ordination though he breathed on them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Acts 13 has sometimes been construed as an ordination, but it should rather be regarded as a commissioning service of men previously chosen and called by God. Both Paul and Barnabas had engaged in the active ministry for several years. "They were not here inducted into the ministry, but designated to a new field of work."⁵ Since it was a designation by the express dictation of the Spirit, the call cannot be imitated, though the laying on of hands is not thereby excluded from a service where God's servants are sent out with the blessing of God. The apostles were not ordinary messengers. They belonged to the Church's infancy and thus did not represent a permanent element in the life of the ongoing church other than in the witness they left behind as enshrined in the Scripture.

There seems to be no evidence that Jesus ever instituted an official priesthood, nor set up an ordained, official ministry. Rather he forbade his followers to call one another "father" or "master" (Matthew 23:8-10). Leon Morris comments: "The implication of these instructions seems clearly to be that the Christian Church was to be a society of equals, a fellowship in which all are brothers and none has special privileges."⁶

C. Commissioning by the Spirit

The New Testament appears to single out some individuals with endowments that may be called "charismatic". No man took such a ministry to himself. This was an experience of a direct call, where no official recognition or ordination was necessary, as would be the case in the local ministry of a Church.⁷ In this group were the prophets (Acts 19:6; Acts 15:32), whose task was to "forth-tell" in the form of exhortation, as well as "foretell", but never were permitted to speak something beyond what came to them by revelation (Romans 12:7). As the Spirit directed, various

functionaries made their appearance, then faded from the scene. They, like the apostles, were a special gift in the time of the infancy of the Church.

It could be said that the awareness of the gift as evidenced in the use thereof and the recognition by others constituted the call, but there was no need of installing such gifted ones into a ministry. Thus Stephanas and his household saw the need of ministering to the saints and voluntarily assumed the challenge (I Corinthians 16:15,16).

In principle, Paul teaches that all ministries in the one body of Christ are on the same level. The word (ministry) (leitourgia) is used only once in a specialized sense (Romans 15:16) by Paul in reference to his own apostleship. Thus it appears that the New Testament is apprehensive of giving an official character to a particular ministry which would suggest some superiority as compared with other unofficial ministries. Thus there is no hierarchy of gifts. The fact that the gifts are "of grace" underlines the truth that they are not man's talents but God's actions; "services" stresses the concern for fellow members; "actions" tells us that any ministry in the church is to be thought of as an event rather than an official position with privileges unaltered for a lifetime.⁸

D. Commissiong by the Apostles

The New Testament record clearly indicates that the apostles were involved in the appointing and commissioning of several types of ministry.

1. Commissioning of Deacons

In Acts 6 we read of the appointment of seven men who were set over the business of serving tables. They are not specifically called deacons, but their ministry is referred to as diakonia and the verb diakonein is used to describe their activity. It was a setting aside to a ministry, not the ministry. That is, it was a functional thing, not the matter of being introduced into an order. The laying on of hands did not impart the Spirit, for they were filled. Here was simply the identification between the assembled body and the functionary, as well as a prayer on their behalf and a commissioning to their responsibility. Furthermore, their ministry was temporary, for Philip and Stephen entered into other work, while at a later date when believers were in need in Jerusalem, the believers in Antioch sent help not to the deacons, but to the elders of that church (Acts 11:30).

The method of appointment is of present concern to us. The Twelve took the initiative when the difficulty arose, but did not themselves chose the Seven. Addressing the assembly of the disciples they instructed them

to "look ye out among you seven men ..." (Acts 6:2f). Thus it was the assembly which made the choice of the men, and they solemnly set them aside for their task in the ceremony of the laying on of hands. Who did the commissioning? Leon Morris thinks that the whole multitude, 'set' the Seven before the apostles, then prayed and laid their hands on them. It is not impossible that Luke is making a change of subject, but the most natural way of understanding the Greek is that the apostles prayed and in an Old Testament symbolical act laid their hands on the men who had been chosen. There are no other references in the New Testament which we may take as referring to the method of appointment of deacons.

2. Commissioning of Elders

The eldership was not the creation of the Christian church. The first Christians were all Jews, and it is to be taken for granted that the system of leadership by elders was taken over from Judaism. Within this pattern the synagogue was the place of instruction and worship under the direction of men who were officially responsible for the administration of Jewish communal life. Elders were elected by the community and admitted to their functions by a solemn ceremony, thereby receiving an office for life. Their function was centered in the law which they were to study, expound and apply to the lives of the people. Within the first Christian congregations it was inevitable the organization would include elders.

Without entering into lengthy discussion we shall accept the interpretation which regards elders (presbuteroi) and bishops (episkopoi) as alternative ways of designating the same office. Episkopos was the natural Greek equivalent for officials such as the Jewish elders. Their function was that of bearing rule in the church (I Timothy 5:17), or, in other words, to take care of the church of God (I Timothy 3:5). As such they were in a position of authority - a responsibility that warranted the exhortation not to lord it over their people (I Peter 5:3). For this task they needed to manifest certain qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7).

As to their appointment, reference must first be made to Acts 14:23 which reads in the A.V. "And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." The word cheirotoneō simply means "to choose, elect by raising hands."¹⁰ The lexicons agree in this designation for the word including the basic ideas of stretching out or holding the hand as in voting; thus to appoint, elect, choose by the show of a hand. It appears that there is no connection with ordination. "The meaning of which here is, that the apostles secured the election of elders by the vote of the churches, with no reference to ceremonial induction into office."¹¹

The word used in Titus 1:5 "ordain elders in every city", is kathistēmi, which means to set, appoint, place, constitute. Both this word and cheirotoneō are general terms and can refer to appointments of various kinds and, in the words of Leon Morris, "it is impossible to hold that of them-

selves they denote the specific act of ordination."¹² Dean Alford concludes that Jerome and Chrysostom attached to these Greek words the meaning of laying on of hands, and this was adopted as standard interpretation by Roman Catholic scholars.¹³

3. Commissioning of Timothy

Apostles were chosen directly by Christ, but the appointment of Timothy must be included in a category in which man makes a selection and performs a commissioning. Timothy and Barnabas, are never called apostles. Timothy's appointment thus is a special case of divine providence in which a laying on of hands is definitely mentioned. Titus apparently did not have such an entrance into his ministry. There are three passages in the epistles addressed to Timothy relating to the laying on of hands. Of these, one has to do with Timothy's responsibility to exercise caution in the selection and installing of elders. "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (I Timothy 5:22), has by some been interpreted to mean that caution should be observed in the receiving into fellowship those who had fallen.¹⁴ The laying on of hands was the rite by which the penitent was readmitted into the church. Such a view appears far-fetched, however, since it is not built on actual evidence that the post-apostolic church had such a practice. ? X

The other two passages in Timothy are pertinent to our discussion as to how Timothy himself was appointed to his ministry. I Timothy 4:14 reads: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." II Timothy 1:6 tells us: "Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands." In all probability these two passages refer to the same event. What judgments can be made on the basis of these sentences? Clearly evident is the fact that there was an impartation of a spiritual power. The gift was given by "prophecy", which may mean that the Holy Ghost had by revelation designated Timothy for admission to the rank of pastor. Thus he had not been chosen in the usual way by the judgment of men, but had been first named by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Another commentator, agreeing with this, adds that this happened at Lystra on Paul's second missionary journey (Acts 16:3). Of this gift and the character of his gift he had been made aware through prophetic utterance of inspired bystanders.¹⁶ Moule elaborates and says that a "prophet" in the church, probably the apostle himself, conveyed the Lord's message of power to the ordained men, and foretold perhaps what victories he would win and things he would have to suffer.¹⁷ Leon Morris says simply that "prophecy" probably refers to a declaration of the Word of God at the service.

The laying on of hands appears to have been done both by the elders and by Paul. As for the "presbytery" it points clearly to the fact that a corporate act was performed in which the existing leaders of the church initiated Timothy into their order.¹⁸ Was this act then what should be named an ordination? Morris states that most students are agreed that I Timothy 4:14 refers to ordination. A number of other scholars declare

✓ categorically that the apostle makes no allusion whatsoever to ordination. Olshausen, supported by several commentators, regards these passages as referring to the communication of the Spirit, which was usually conferred by the laying on of hands of an apostle. So Peter and John laid their hands on the converts in Samaria, and they received the Holy Ghost. Ananias laid his hands on Saul and he was filled with the Spirit. According to this view, gifts and the Spirit have ceased being conveyed in this way, the rite of laying on of hands in ordination seems of no avail.¹⁹

Since the references in the pastoral epistles refer only to one man, Timothy and his experience in respect to his task, and since the emphasis appears to be specifically upon the impartation and use of a spiritual gift, we may well need to confess that "the foundation is too slender and uncertain to allow of resting on them any doctrine, or imposing any ceremony that shall be regarded as essential to the validity of ministerial acts."²⁰ Morris assents: "We should like to know a good deal more than we do, but it is better to face facts than to pretend to knowledge that we do not possess."²¹

E. Commissioning by Elders

A final method of appointment, already alluded to in the case of Timothy (I Timothy 4:14) and of Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:3), is by that body of leaders in a congregation known as elders. In the case of Timothy, the corporate act of the presbytery initiated him into the service of the churches. In the case of Barnabas and Saul, no gift or qualification was communicated. They were called for a new ministry related to outreach. There is, however, the significant feature of identification and commissioning, for they laid their hands on them and sent them away. Once before, Saul had submitted to the laying on of hands of Ananias; he now submitted to the rite as performed by the elders of the church at Antioch. This was not ordination, for both men had been active and successful in a ministry for sometime. "They were not inducted into the ministry, but designated to a new field of service."²² And the designation took place under the authority of elders. It appears as a reciprocal relationship - apostles commissioning elders; elders commissioning apostles.

Summary

From the biblical evidence, or the paucity thereof, let us attempt a listing of specific principles that may be used as a foundation for further thought and application to our contemporary concern about the ministry:

①. The Church is to be a definite society rather than a group of individuals. This was Christ's intention that His followers should be

infused by His ideals and act in a fellowship of love. As "the good Shepherd" he desired that his flock be nurtured by the service of shepherds called, empowered, and authorized to do their work. In this sense Jesus Christ made definite provision for a ministry for the church, although this is not to be construed as being the establishment of an official priesthood with mediating powers.

2. Since Jesus forbade his followers to address each other as "master" or "father", it must be concluded that the Church was to be a society of equals, a fellowship in which all are brothers and none has special privileges.²³ This means that all in the local body - leaders and followers - share alike in the gifts of God's redemptive grace, although not all have the same measure of responsibility. Some men, like the Twelve, or the Seven, or the Seventy may be singled out for special spheres of service.

3. Ministers in the Church are not such by an inherent right or power or virtue of their own. What they do, they do on the basis that it is a continuation of the work of Christ - ministering the gospel to men that they might be saved. Thus it matters greatly that Christ is working in and through them.

4. The biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers is central in the concept of the ministry. No man obviously can perform atoning and mediatorial functions on behalf of others. But believers can offer an acceptable sacrifice of themselves in grateful service (Romans 12:1); they can approach the throne of God (Hebrews 10:19), and intercede for all men. Thus the way of approach is not through a duly ordained ministry, as though God respects the approach of the minister more than that of the lay person.

5. Since the characteristic word by which the work of the Christian ministry in the New Testament is diakonia, indicative of the service performed by Christians, in contrast to the ideas of control and rulership among Gentiles, it must be said that Christianity knows nothing of a spiritual elite group occupying positions of special privilege. The highest calling is to serve others, not to lord it over them. Yet in all this, the appointed servant in the church is the minister of Christ, not of men.

6. Certain men are God's gift to the Church to perform specific forms of ministry (Ephesians 4:7-11). As such they perform one ministry. It may not be too strong to say that the Word cannot be adequately proclaimed without a ministry.

7. It appears clearly that the commissioning of certain men calls for the following necessary ingredients: a saving faith on the part of the servant; a quality of life, belief and ability, and fulness of the Spirit as indispensable for the task to be performed; a selection

of such a man by some approved and visible method; the designation of the man, and authorization for a specific task to be performed in a given area; the prayer for and upon such a man in all seriousness (fasting), with a commending of him to the Lord. For such a ceremony, laying on of hands does not seem to be essential or obligatory. However, it is not contrary to the letter or spirit of the New Testament, and as a matter of Christian liberty is permissible and commendable. The form and manner of induction may be optional with the churches and candidates, although uniformity may well be regarded as desirable and contributory to the best understanding of the matter in hand.

II. THE QUESTION OF COMMISSIONING OF MINISTERS IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

Must the New Testament be taken as a permanent pattern for church order today? Clayton Beyler, in a recent statement on ordination in the Mennonite Church writes: "In the matter of ordering of ministries we cannot follow the New Testament in detail, but rather seek to discover the underlying principles which can guide the church. The ordering of ministries in the New Testament times grew out of the structures of society of the first century. Today we must order ministries relevant to the society of our day."²⁴

There appears to be reason to believe that no attempt was made by Christ nor by the apostles to declare a permanent form of ministerial appointment and service. However, the many groups that have arisen within Christianity have followed one of three forms of ministerial policy: the episcopalian, the presbyterian, and the congregational.

1. The episcopalian system is the government of the church by bishops, priests, and deacons. All three offices demand ordination, but only the bishop has the power to ordain. In the presbyterian pattern, bishops and presbyters are regarded as one, the terms designating one function. The selection and ordination of elders is the responsibility of the local congregation. The principle order is the teaching elder who is ordained by the laying on of hands of other elders, after receiving a call from a local congregation. However, ordination is for the whole Church, not for some small section of it. The minister is first a "minister of God" (II Corinthians 6:4), but never a minister of the people.²⁵ Methodism, in its view of ordination, regards Christ's ministers in the Church as those called by God, endowed with gifts, and ordained to the sole occupation of shepherding the flock, and thereby having a principal part in these duties. However, they do not differ from the Lord's people in the matter of the priesthood, nor do they have exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. The

ordination by the imposition of the hands is expressive of the Church's recognition of the minister's personal call, to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office.

2. All groups of Christians whose emphasis is upon the autonomy of the local group belong in the category of congregationalism. Pastors and deacons are the basic forms of ministry. Ordained men are regarded as God-called, gifted, and trained laymen doing the work of the church full time. The ceremony does not mean the enduement with divine grace, for Christ the head of the body is in direct contact with the body. Since the priesthood encompasses all believers, there are no "laymen" in the church.

It has been claimed that Anabaptism gave the priesthood its full place. The congregation issued a call to someone to perform a ministry. After prayer a spiritual brother was sought out, chosen by vote, examined by the elders, then elected by a regular vote as preacher, and ordained by the laying on of hands. The divine call experienced as an inner urge to preach was regarded as a pre-requisite to ordination with or without formal training. Ordination thus was an act of the church in which the minister - elect received confirmation to his office by a ceremony of laying on of hands of a bishop and by the intercession of a congregation which gave him the right to lead the congregation in worship, perform the duties of his office, preach the Word of God, perform marriages, ordain, administer baptism and communion. The Schleithem Confession (1527) simply declares that a church should support its pastor, by this implying that a man is called as shepherd of the flock. Menno Simons yielded to the urging of a group of brethren to assume the task of elder and bishop. He taught that preachers must receive their call through the church which in the time of spiritual need acts under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

What now must be said for our day within the framework of the biblical teaching and the awareness of a long historical development in the matter of the appointment of servants in the Church? What are the possible directions in the matter of ordination today? Here are suggestions given in the form of answers to several key questions:

A. Is Ordination Necessary? - implies yes, but doesn't say so!

In its popular sense it is that form of service by which men are admitted to the ranks of the Christian ministry, and to the exercise of its functions.²⁶ For some it is more specifically an ecclesiastical rite by which the call is ratified and the office of the ministry is publicly committed to the one called. Do such statements however, truly present the New Testament teaching on the subject? From the discussion followed in the earlier part of this paper, must we conclude that New Testament ordination was an election, an appointment to office, and had no reference

to any formal induction into office. "Call of pastors with their acceptance is ordination. Election and ordination are spoken of as the same."²⁷

Shall we teach that a chosen man, according to New Testament teaching, shall stand in a place of recognized responsibility in a congregation? It is clear that the sheep need a shepherd to tend and feed them (I Peter 5:1-5; John 21:15,16; Acts 20:28). By what procedure shall such a shepherd take his rightful place in charge of the flock? According to Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed (cheirotoneo) elders. They did not ordain as the Authorized version translates. In Acts 20:28 the inner work of the heart is declared, for Paul says concerning elders: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." What the nature of the ceremony of appointment was we cannot tell; we can conclude, however, that the selected men were accepted by the congregation and given the freedom of performing their task.

Furthermore, it is clear that the gathering of believers needed leadership in the form of elders. How should they begin their functions? As indicated above, they must be selected and appointed. Paul left Titus in Crete with the duty of appointing (kathistemi) elders in every town (Titus 1:5). No man could arise on his own volition and presume to stand in the assembly, teaching or preaching the Word. An appointment and commissioning was necessary. Without it they certainly could not have the rule over others, or expect the individual believers to submit themselves (Hebrews 13:7,17).

It appears, therefore, that whereas formal appointment is not mentioned in connection with most of the gifts of the Spirit, it is related specifically to the function of speaking the Word of God (Hebrews 13:7); feeding the flock of God (Acts 20:28); convincing and exhorting by means of sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). In the words of the apostle John, a church "receives" a brother who engages in the ministry of the Word. As for those who are "deceivers", not holding to the doctrine of Christ, John said that they were not to be received into the house (II John 7,10). He also indicates that a church may come under the domination of a presumptuous man, who by his own judgments and decisions refuses to receive the true preachers of the Word. Thus Diotrephes would not receive John (III John 9,10). Without reading anything formal or ceremonial into such acts of "receiving", it appears conclusive that no man can assume a responsibility in the congregation of God's people except he be asked, authorized, or appointed to do so.

Ordination, or commissioning, is therefore, the act by which men are admitted to the rank and functions of religious teachers among the people, and pastors of the flock of Christ.

B. Who Shall Ordain?

Who shall do the appointing? It cannot be as in the case of Christ, who was sent by the Father, and baptized by John. It cannot be as in the case of the apostles who stood in close proximity to Jesus, and received their commission directly from Him. It cannot be a pure appointment of the Spirit of God on the basis of which a man will take upon himself spiritual responsibilities. It cannot be as in the case of the elders in the infant churches where the apostles gave sanction to certain chosen leaders to carry on the work of God. We do not accept the apostolic succession theory, though many have found strength in this pattern of appointment.

Because a church is a body complete in itself, though without officers, it has power to create officers out of its own members. If gifts are given by the Head of the Church, then it can be assumed that there will be a recognition of the presence of these gifts. Furthermore, it will be clear that certain selected gifted men will be given charges as to principal responsibilities. The right to choose and benefit from the ministry of its own pastors and teachers is one of the primary rights with which Christ has invested His churches.²⁸

Although the Acts 14:23 passage seems to indicate that the apostles had a primary responsibility for ordering the life of the churches, it must be assumed that the evident direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) preceded or at least accompanied the appointment of these men. That is to say, the local congregations certainly knew their leading men, recognized their gifts, pointed them out to the apostles, and joined with the apostles in the decisions that these men were to be authorized elders in the churches.

If this be true, then we cannot sanction an exclusive clerical ordination, for such procedure would mean that there is a succession in the ministry which flows through the hands of previously ordained clergy. A man is not duly inducted into the ministry until another minister, whether a member of that congregation or of some other church in the same denomination, has joined in praying for God's blessing. It is debatable whether a church can make a man a minister to any but themselves, but it is true that the wider recognition is profitable and perhaps needful, which comes as clergy join in the ordination ceremony so that a man may move freely within a given communion without having to feel pressed to declare his valid ministry.

It is the churches that ordain; the district, through its officers, may well be asked to participate in order that the new minister may find approval wherever he moves within his jurisdiction; the denomination may also have its selected officers participating, thereby saying that they accept this man's ministry.

C. What is the Effect of Ordination?

What does ordination do for a man? Whatever the ceremony may involve, ordination in the congregational pattern does not have sacramental value to endow the candidate with spiritual moral or intellectual qualities. No special character or grace is conferred upon a man. We agree with the Baptist conviction in that we deny that there is any "order" of ministry in the sense that there is in the church a class of men made distinctive by some special endowment of divine grace as being conferred by the ordination ceremony, or the laying on of hands, or in any other way.

To the Roman or the Anglican an ordained man is set aside to do what a layman must not do. With us, ordained men are to be regarded as lay people doing the work of the church full time. If the term, "clergy" is used among us to designate men in such full time service, and this is understood by all, no criticism need be forthcoming. If we use the term and thereby attach a meaning, perhaps more by tradition than conviction, which gives the ordained man rights and powers and status, then the term is wrong. Truly reformed churches can harbour no distinction between clergy and laity, but they can and most accept a difference between function and responsibility. As Beyler notes: "Ordination is not a change in status but a change in function, necessary because of the limitations of church members. In calling members to specific ministries, the church does not forfeit her ministry but assigns, in something of a representative way, a gifted individual to carry on a specific task in a structured, orderly manner."²⁹ With this caution we must observe that the functioning of such individuals in specific ministries is never properly the ministry, which always belongs to the body as a whole. Beyler adds: "The ministry can thus be conceived as functioning through men, but is never synonymous with a position or office which an individual fills by election or ordination. Those performing the specific ministries always remain in the position of servants in relation to other members of the body and in the relationship of slaves to Christ, the head of the body."³⁰

Although ordination does not have sacramental efficacy, it does bring dignity with the assumed function. A man's function rests upon what Christ has done and is doing. This in itself endues the task of serving with a significance which of course is not greater and no less than that which each member of the congregation experiences. The minister is no more than a servant, yet as one serving Christ and the church he must be highly esteemed. He is Christ's instrument and is to be seen as such. His rule, whatever this may mean in a particular setting, must be respected and his godly admonition obeyed. Paul writes to Timothy: "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine" (I Timothy 5:17). Hebrews 13:7 agrees: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation."

D. What is the Responsibility of the One Ordained?

First and foremost is the task of preaching the gospel. Paul, himself said that he had not been called to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Since men are brought into the fellowship of the saints through the proclamation of the Word of God as the gospel concerning Jesus Christ (Romans 10:17), whether by formal addresses or information communication, the ministry of the Word is "the fountain head without which all other ministries in the church run dry."³¹ The evangelical purpose in the church is bound up with the Word which in part is dependent upon one who has been sent to declare it (Romans 10:8-15). It is true that the work with the Word is truly the work of all believers, not only of one special order of men. That is, the Word is not bound to the office of the minister alone; yet within the ordering of the life of the church it appears that some are particularly responsible for this work. Thus it is not expedience which determines what needs to be for proper "ordering" of the church, since, as has been suggested we do not have committed to us the watching over animals, but the church.

It is of interest that this position is identical with Luther's thinking. He was concerned that there should be always present in the church the possibility of the exercise of the highest office, to prevent disorder on the one hand, while making sure that the church would not become a Babylon. Such a conviction was based not on dogmatic theology but on "evangelical purpose", that is, the presence and protection of the Word of God in the congregations.

P.T. Forsyth brings out this point when he says, "The first apostles were neither priests nor bishops. They were preachers, missionaries, heralds of the Cross, and agents of the Gospel."³²

Is it the ordained man's sole right to administer the ordinances? The conviction has been held among most evangelicals that no man has a right to do this until hands have been laid upon him. There is evidence that many sound scholars of the Bible and church history regard the administration as open to all within the church. However, the laity are to exercise their priestly rights in this regard only when the time and the circumstances require it. There is no one passage in the New Testament which proves that it is the exclusive right of the elders to baptize. Within true congregationalism one of the deacons, or any brother of the Church whom it may authorize for the purpose, is competent to baptize or preside at the remembrance of Christ at the Lord's supper. *

Within the context of our countries, we should add that the ordained minister has the right and responsibility to lawfully solemnize marriages. Marriage is held by law to be a civil contract, and its conditions prescribed by statute. The various classes of persons authorized to take the acknowledgments of the contracting parties are specified. Among these are accredited ministers of the various denominations, so recognized according to the pattern of operation of their own churches or denominations.

E. What are the Limitations of Ordination?

In this connection we must ask whether it is for life, or whether it is for that period of time in which a function is performed by due choice of a congregation or appointment by a denomination? Is the effect of ordination permanent or transient? Does it confer an indelible ministerial character? If the minister should lapse from the faith, be deposed, or leave the sacred for a secular calling, and be restored or return, would ordination need to be repeated?

Harold S. Bender, in his article on "ordination" in the Mennonite Encyclopedia, regards the Mennonite ordination as normally conferring a lifetime status. In the more conservative groups ministers removed from office for such causes as heresy, or gross sin, or insubordination, were not considered to have lost their ordination, but to have been silenced, that is, no longer allowed to preach, and could be restored to office without reordination.

In the eyes of W. David Stacey, writing in the Expository Times, "nothing that we do afterwards, no sin, no unfaithfulness, can cancel it. For the rest of our lives and, as some would say, throughout eternity, we are ordained men."³⁴ Stacey believes that the minister is different from men in all other professions. He cannot pass in and out of the ministry without scandal or loss of conscience. A man who has been singled out and put forward as one to serve specifically in the Church is not so free. He can only do the work of the church wherever that may take him. "To resign and do anything which is not under the immediate direction of the Church must involve a sense of contradiction and loss."³⁵

Could we then say that since the substance of the first ordination to an evangelical ministry was a recognition of a divine call to and a fitness for that ministry, and a sending forth to that work, reordination is not necessary? If the "setting apart" initially was primarily for the ministry of the Word, then any further actions, as these relate to work in other churches of the same denomination or in other countries are a matter of personal discretion and not one of New Testament principles. To insist that reordination is essential may mean that a man was not set apart to an evangelical service. Since each denomination has its own method of induction into office it may be the choices of that group to require reordination, thereby not denying that man's call to the evangelical ministry, but by examination of the candidate's fitness and orthodoxy to satisfy themselves that such a person can be entrusted with spiritual responsibilities in the denomination into which he has come. If the individual has proven himself by previous ministries, only a recognition may be necessary, without laying on of hands. Thus reordination or recognition is a matter of indifference, except where a man is required to deny his inner call in order to have the recognition of another group. Some public service would

be appropriately preceded by an examination of the candidate on points which distinguish his former denominational doctrine from that which he has now assumed. Otherwise they could not give him their fellowship and commendation in his new position.

F. What are the Essential Elements in an Ordination Ceremony?

This service, though performed but occasionally in the life of a congregation, is in reality a worship service, enhancing the spiritual experience of a church. In it the church responds to God's Word and call to them through the Holy Spirit, in the pattern of Acts 13. In fact, it may well represent the new and vital dimensions of the church's life in that it recognizes and witnesses to the faithful working of the Holy Spirit in dispensing His gifts, moving upon individuals to respond in obedience, and calling upon the brotherhood to state afresh its promises of being true to the divine mandate. It further represents, as Beyler points out, the central place of the Word of God in the life of the people of God.³⁶

What takes place in the rite of ordination in the presence of witnesses and for the ordering of the church is subject only to faith. It is the faith of God's people, a congregation of redeemed souls, who heed God's commands, expecting His presence, trusting in His Word which is life, believing that God has called a man and anticipating in faith that God will bless that man as he faithfully follows the directives of the Spirit and the principles of God's Word.

Another element in the ceremony is that fact that it is a "sealing ordinance" in which certain facts are solemnly, formally and publicly recognized. It seals the internal call of the candidate from God to the ministry. Only Christ does this. As Leslie Newbiggin has written, ordination is an act of the church done in faith towards Christ, her head, that He hears the prayers of His people and bestows a commission upon the one whom He has called and gives the church the joy to accept that particular form of ministry.³⁷ Furthermore, the external call of the church to the man is sealed. No man can take a ministry to himself. It is a public ratification of the call and the election. Only when there is a basic conviction in the hearts of both church and candidate, shall the rite of ordination be performed. The man is given formal authentication by being admitted to the office of the ministry, giving him a right to discharge specified functions. These functions, however, are not limited to the mere traditional pattern of activity, but the church and the man in faith have liberty to expand the shape, nature and the place of this ministering as the needs for the mission of the congregation of Christ expand and change.

A third element in the ceremony is the laying on of hands. In the Old Testament such a rite represent a prayer-blessing, or identification with a sacrifice, or commissioning for a particular service or responsibility. Thus, an Israelite would lean his hand upon an animal thereby transferring guilt to an approved representative; or in the formal consecration

of the Levites (Numbers 8:10) the Levite stood for the first born of the people; in the case of Moses and Joshua authority was transferred to a successor; also, as in Jacob's dying blessings, he laid hands on his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. The New Testament rite was undoubtedly taken from the Old Testament, rather than from Judaism.

W. David Stacey believes that in ordination "the crux of the service is the laying on of hands."³⁸ As such it is a representative act. Even as the prayer at the ceremony is the prayer of the whole church, so the hands are the hands of the whole church. Man does something on behalf of God and it is the activity of the entire congregation representing a means of identifying a special ministry with the ministry of the whole body. It involves mutual commitment and support on the part of the individual and the whole church. It is also a designative act, in that there is a positive and unequivocal identification of the recipient of the assignment as well as the blessing for the successful performance in that ministry. This man and no other at that time, is set forth for the ministry of the church. It is a symbolic act, in that it portrays the dunamis of Christ as given, the blessing of the Lord as desired, for the ministry of blessing others and making whole. It is a delegative act, whereby a responsibility is conveyed. The deacons were appointed with responsibility (Acts 6:6); Paul and Barnabas were thus commissioned. Without this these men were not authorized to function. It should be noted that no qualitative standard is involved - zeal or devotion - by which the minister is now distinguished from the laity, beyond the yielded will, the living faith, the receiving action of the candidate.

But we must hasten to add that laying on of hands is not to be regarded as essential to the setting forth of a man to the ministry. No extraordinary gifts are imparted to a man by this rite. However, such a symbolism is not contrary to the letter of spirit of the Scriptures, and as a matter of Christian liberty is permissible, as well as becoming and proper. Whose hands should actually be laid upon the candidate? In view of the fact that it is the church that ordains, one or several members of the congregation should be involved. Since the man is entering the fellowship of the denominational ministry, pastors of the congregation, if there be such, and representative pastors from sister churches could be included. Since the man moves in a wider circle of preachers, it would be well for a minister of some other denomination to be included, thereby symbolizing the wider evangelical fellowship of the ministry. ecumenical

A fourth element in the ceremony is prayer - the prayer of the officiating persons and the prayer of the man being ordained. In keeping with the Old Testament pattern, a prayer for blessing upon the individual is to be commended, since the man is not going to fulfill his ministry in human strength; he will need the power of God which will become manifest as others intercede for Him. The prayer of the man himself may be considered as the vow made before God. It is his prayer of promise to do,

to abstain, to engage in a service of consecration to God; it is a prayer of petition for the help and support of the Lord for this function. The promise may also be given in a spoken word before God and the congregation in which he expresses in clear statements his assurance of the call of God, his response and fundamental beliefs and the determination to follow in the path of obedience. In contrast to general statements of dedication sung by all Christians in such hymns as "Take my Life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee," the consecration of ordination is specific and the language is precise. Such a prayer and vow is made in the presence of colleagues, friends and brethren. No preacher lives to himself, and so he calls upon others to witness what he is doing and saying. The prayers and vows are made obviously before God and to one's own heart. It has been said, that promises make the life of the minister easier. The time of more casual and spontaneous service is over; now the path is laid out with clarity. The promises and prayers made freely, though not without struggle, color all the subsequent actions with sobriety and yet with spiritual freedom. It simplifies the matter of perseverance, for when all appears well, he serves gladly and triumphantly, with love and confidence; when dark times come, and the mind thinks of alternatives, the will holds the ship afloat and creates the discipline of continuance. As someone has said, "The vow is the compass needle that keeps a man in the path."³⁹

In conclusion let us be reminded of the challenging task that faces the Church today, and the resources which are available for each one of God's people as energetic members of the body of Christ. For those whom God calls to a special ministry may the commissioning to that ministry be such that it will lead to an outflow of power indeed - not a mere routine of duties, but the conveying of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ through consecrated men whose hearts burn within them, whose faith removes mountains, whose word of reconciliation draws many to the Savior.

Orlando H. Wiebe
March 5 & 6, 1970

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Does our view of the Scriptures call for a precise adoption of the practices described, or is there freedom in the Spirit to adapt its principles for our time?
2. Does the teaching of the priesthood of all believers permit the strong, directive influence of leaders in the church?
3. Is a "call to preach" still a valid expectation in our day?
4. How can we reconcile the "permanency" of the ordination concept in the church's history with evident changes in the experiences of ministers as to vocation?
5. Is a commitment to specific Anabaptist or denominational beliefs a prerequisite for commissioning and ministry in our brotherhood?

NOTES

1. Walter Klassen, "New Presbyter is Old Priest Writ Large," Concern (February, 1969), p. 7.
2. W. Sanday, The Conception of Priesthood in the Early Church (London: Longmans Green, 1899), p. 69. Cited by Baker's Dictionary of Theology, p. 387.
3. Leon Morris, The Ministers of God (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1964), p. 19.
4. Eduard Schweitzer, Church Order in the New Testament (London: S.C.M. Press, 1961), p. 21.
5. Edward T. Hiscox, The New Directory for Baptist Churches (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1951), p. 355.
6. Morris, op.cit., p. 18.
7. Ibid., p. 64.
8. Ibid., p. 59.
9. Ibid., p. 88.
10. Hiscox, op. cit., p. 349.
11. Ibid., p. 349.
12. Morris, op. cit., p. 78.
13. Cited by Hiscox, op. cit., p. 350.
14. A position held by a group of commentators, among whom is Ellicot.
15. An interpretation by John Calvin.
16. William Hendriksen, Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1957)
17. H.C.G. Moule, The Second Epistle to Timothy (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952), p. 47.
18. Morris, op. cit., p. 78.
19. Hiscox, op. cit., p. 357.
20. Ibid., p. 357.
21. Morris, op.cit., p. 79.
22. Hiscox, op. cit., p. 355.
23. Morris, op. cit., p. 18.
24. Clayton Byler, "Statement on Ordination in the Mennonite Church," Paper Submitted to the Ministerial Committee of the Mennonite General Conference, 1967, p. 2.
25. Harry G. Goodykoontz, The Minister in the Reformed Tradition (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 7.
26. Hiscox, op. cit., p. 344.
27. Hiscox, op. cit., p. 352.
28. Ibid., p. 366.
29. Beyler, The Call to Preach (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1963), p. 16.
30. Ibid., pp. 16, 17.
31. Ibid., p. 6.
32. P.T. Forsyth, Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind (Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), p. 7.
33. Mennonite Encyclopedia, Vol. III, p. 706.

34. W. David Stacey, "Concerning the Ministry", The Expository Times (Vol. LXXV, No. 9), p. 264.
35. Ibid., p. 265.
36. Beyler, Statement on Ordination, p. 6.
37. Cited in Goodykoontz, op. cit., pp. 118, 119.
38. Stacey, op. cit., p. 264.
39. Stacey, "Concerning the Ministry", The Expository Times (Vol. LXXV, No. 10), p. 294.