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THE CALL AND ORDINATION TO THE MINISTRY

During the last decade a number of questions have surfaced in our denomination relating to the call and ordination to the ministry. In this paper I intend to take into account at least some of the perspectives which have been expressed within our brotherhood, even though not all of them were presented at General Conference study sessions.

Before we take a look at these let us briefly be reminded that any reflection on the call and ordination to the ministry must invoke in us a sense of awe and wonderment at the grace of God! We are dealing with a subject which calls our attention in the first place to the marvellous grace of our Lord. Every call of God to follow Him, to experience His redeeming love, and to serve Him in His Kingdom is divine grace at work. In every call of God the Holy Spirit is at work distributing a variety of gifts and ministries - "to each one individually just as He wills" (I Corinthians 12). To speak of God's call to Himself and into His service is to be reminded of Christ's promise, "I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16). To witness God's call to men in our fellowship, to see evidence of His Spirit at work in them, is to be assured of the reality of God's presence in the midst of His church giving direction, hope and expectations for the future. The acknowledgement of God's call to ministry in the lives of others in a solemn ceremony (ordaining them) incorporates an act of gratitude and joy for God's gracious provision.

The Bible suggests to us that at the right time God calls those needed for special ministry in His Kingdom. Jeremiah was a teenager when God called him with the words "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5). Amos was a herdsman and a farmer when the Lord took him from the flock with the words, "Go prophesy to my people, Israel" (Amos 7:15). That overwhelming call is further described by him in the words "A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord has spoken! Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8). Peter and Andrew were fishing when Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men!" (Matthew 4:19) We read that they immediately left their nets and followed Him.

God calls all men to follow Him and to serve Him. Such calling is total - not partial! Every Christian is called to take up his cross and follow Christ - to present himself as a living sacrifice in total dedication to God (Romans 12:1-2). With Paul he is to confess, "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). The Lordship of Christ is to be absolute!

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Any discussion of the call and ordination to the ministry must stir up afresh in each one of us the vision of God communicated to us in His Word. We stand before a sovereign, holy and gracious God Who calls out, "Whom shall I send?" (Is. 6). We stand before a resurrected Lord Who loved us and gave Himself for us. To Him has been given all power and lordship in this age and in the age to come. He calls us to follow Him, to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation". His Spirit gives good gifts to all believers in order that His purposes in the world might be fulfilled. Him, we wish to worship and obey; His cause in the world is our concern; to that end we bend our hearts and minds in any discussion on the call and ordination to the ministry.

QUESTIONS IN THE BROTHERHOOD

It is not always easy to determine the precise problems some have with the current theology and practice of ordination in our brotherhood.

Brother John Regehr's paper, "The Call to the Ministry" presented to the Canadian Conference in 1976, suggests that a great deal of confusion exists in our churches about God's call to the ministry and the ordination of these by the church. The result is that we lack pastors in our churches. Part of the problem, he goes on to say, lies with the mistaken view that really only "full time" ministers or pastors should be ordained.

The contention is that the New Testament pattern would suggest a plurality of ministers (a team of ordained men) in every local church, who would complement each other with their respective gifts and consequently provide a richer diversity and more satisfying ministry to the members of the church. Not all members of the ministry team need to be in full time employment with the church. The problem as Brother Regehr sees it is that our present view of ordination is too closely bound to a "full time" ministry.

"We would do well to disassociate ordination from the professional/occupational model and use it more freely. Ordination is the endorsement of the church given to one who functions in that church in some specific and significant public capacity, namely in some Word/Life/Leadership ministry. Always we must keep in mind that those Whom we ordain are not to do the work of the church but are to see to it that the church becomes the church and functions as a church, i.e., that the church accomplishes its ministry. Few persons who the church wishes to affirm with ordination for a specific ministry within a congregation will resist that kind of a call."

Brother Frank C. Peters, at the General Conference in 1969 posed another kind of problem in the following words:

"One area (in need of continued study) is that of the meaning of ministry in our day. This would include the Biblical definition of ordination by laying on of hands. If in theory we do not have a sacramental view of the ministry are we in danger in operating functionally on such a premise?"

What exactly it means to operate functionally on the premise of having a sacramental view of the ministry is not made clear. A hint of the meaning inferred is perhaps given by a statement which emerged from the Committee of Reference and Counsel of the Southren District Conference in 1970 as follows:

"The New Testament is clear in pointing out that ordination has nothing to do with conferring status upon a person. As a Conference we have always denied that any sacramental value (conferring of grace) rested in the act of ordination, but we have proceeded in a fashion that for some, at least, has suggested a change in status of the person ordained. We need to be reminded that no magical transmission of power or right was inherent in the New Testament ordination procedure." (Yearbook, page 10)

This problem of the retention of some sacramental overtones in the practice of ordination in the Mennonite Brethren Church preoccupied some of our brethren who addressed themselves to questions of the ministry. In 1970 Brother Orlando Wiebe presented a paper at the Study Conference entitled "A Commissioning of Servants in the Church". Ordination according to Wiebe is "the act by which men are admitted to the rank and function of religious teachers among the people, and pastors of the flock of Christ." That there needs to be a public act or ceremony to enable ministers who have gifts to function with authority is stressed by him. However, he concludes with the interesting comment that "the laying on of hands is neither essential or obligatory" in such a ceremony.

Underlying the presentation one can detect a certain tension between the Biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers and the Biblical understanding of the ordination of some. Repeatedly there is emphasis on what ordination is not to mean, namely, that it is not to be seen as an introduction into some priestly order, some priveleged rank, some ministry on a higher level, or as a conferring of rights, power and status. Ordination is to be seen as being merely a recognition of a functional change within the body of Christ. At the same time it is suggested that it brings with it dignity, and that ordained men are to be highly esteemed and their rule is to be respected. Wiebe never really sets forth the Biblical rationale for distinction between the priesthood of all believers and the special ministry of some as is apparent in the following words:

"It is true that the work with the Word is truly the work of all believers and 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."

Another paper which addresses itself in a particular way to the Mennonite Brethren view of ordination is an unpublished thesis at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno entitled, "Toward a more Biblical view of ordination", written by Harry Heidebrecht. The thesis frankly maintains that the Mennonite Brethren have inadvertently retained and adopted certain vestments and practices of sacramentalism (page 75). What is meant is that to some extent the practice of ordination in the Mennonite Brethren Church tends to weaken the Biblical concept of the priesthood of all believers. It weakens it by developing 'a special priesthood' within the church who minister on behalf of the rest. The trend towards the ordination of fewer ministers in the local church, and particularly only the full time ministers, reduces the involvement of gifted members of a congregation. The suggested cure is to ordain (to give recognition or to commission) a broader spectrum of ministers and thereby to reflect more nearly the New Testament multiplicity of elders, teachers and pastors (page 87). Such a multiple ministry would better equip the saints for their task in the world. Ordination would then reflect more of a functional distinction within the body of Christ and not perpetuate the notion that the ordained persons have attained to some special rank or status above that of their fellow believers.

THE PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS AND THE ROLE OF THE ORDAINED MINISTRY

In the light of the discussion within the Brotherhood I would like to make the following observations.

1. A Vital Priesthood of all Believers Demands an Ordained Ministry!

"I will build my church", Jesus promised (Matthew 16:18). Those who would be gathered around Him, the Good Shepherd, and those who would be drawn towards Him when He would be lifted up, encompassed all mankind. As the Messiah, into Whose hands the Father had given all power, the strategy for world evangelization was laid through the great commission. The divine mandate was to proclaim the gospel in all the world.

The church was to be a new people of God. Not only would its membership consist of men and women drawn from all the races and nations of the world, but all were to be equal brothers:

"But do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He Who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is Christ." (Matthew 23:8-10)

These words indicate that our Lord wanted to create a brotherhood which would relate very closely to Him, without some mediatorial priesthood, and with close dependence on His guidance, His care and His instruction. None should stand above the others. There was to be only one Teacher, one Father and one Leader. They were not to seek dominion over each other as was common among the Gentiles. When James and John came to Him seeking rank in the Kingdom, Jesus spoke of the cup of suffering and being slaves to each other saying:

"You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. **But** it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant." (Mark 10:42-43)

The church was to have no privileged caste - Christ would be active among them where two or three were gathered in His name. In His name, His followers were to be engaged in the ministry of mercy to others (Matthew 25:31-46). Every Christian also had the responsibility of confessing Him before men (Matthew 10:32).

The epistles of the New Testament underscore the priesthood of all believers even more emphatically. Peter addressing himself to the believers writes:

"You also as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (I Peter 2:5);

and again he writes:

"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him Who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light." (I Peter 2:9-10)

Every believer therefore has the privilege and responsibility of access to the throne of grace, of sharing in the proclamation of the gospel, of offering up the sacrifice of self and of the praise of his lips. Furthermore, every believer is to participate in the proclamation of the gospel; he is always to be ready to make a defense to every one who asks him to give an account for the hope that is in him (I Peter 3:15).

The reason why every Christian has a ministry is because every Christian has been endowed by the Spirit. In one of Paul's great chapters on the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church, and by way of introduction to mentioning some specific ministries within the body of Christ he states, "but to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (I Corinthians 12:7). When Paul

compares the church to a body growing to maturity he again is careful to point out that "to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7). He continues to say that the body cannot pull together or grow to maturity in Christ unless every joint and every individual part works properly (Ephesians 4:16). The encouragement to use one's gift is well summed up by Peter,

"As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak as it were, the utterances of God, whoever serves let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to Whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever." (I Peter 4:10-11)

Every Christian, therefore, has received grace and gifts for ministry; he is also encouraged to desire earnestly the greater gifts (I Corinthians 12:31). He is exhorted to seek wisdom for his tasks (James 1). The early Christians prayed for boldness to proclaim the gospel (Acts 4:29-31). That believers can neglect their gifts is suggested by Paul's exhortation to Timothy when he calls on him to stir up the gift of God he had received or to kindle it afresh (II Timothy 1:6; I Timothy 4:14). The effectual working of the body of Christ in the first place calls for each member to enter fully upon the privilege and responsibility of being a follower of Christ in the world. Luther and the other Reformers recognized in measure the Biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers during the Reformation. Anabaptists have seen their beginnings in the 16th century as a recovery of the New Testament vision.

It is abundantly clear from the New Testament evidence that the task Jesus Christ set for His church cannot be effectively accomplished apart from a vital priesthood of all believers. Every believer stands before His Lord Who calls him to follow Him in total obedience. Only as believers serve, edify, encourage one another and all men, can the church be the church in the world! These privileges and responsibilities cannot be delegated. Gifts of God need to be stirred up through prayer, a close walk with God, engagement in fellowship with others, and obedient ministry in the world.

Why then are ordained men needed? From the very beginning of the church Jesus singled out some of the brethren for special service. There were the seventy sent out; there were the twelve chosen to be with Him. We may well ask with Leon Morris:

"Why did Jesus chose them? Does not this mark them out as being different in some way from the others and if a special place can be assigned in the work of Christ to this particular group how are we to reconcile this with 'all of you are brothers'?" (Ministers of God, page 19)

The special function of some within the brotherhood, while not constituting a permanent form of ministry, establishes that principle! Through the inspired leadership of the apostles and others from time to time singled out for special service, the church grew in maturity and in its mission among men.

Christ called some within the brotherhood to special ministry in order to maintain the vitality of the life and ministry of the church. Of particular significance is the passage in Ephesians 4:11-12:

"And he gave some as apostles
 as prophets
 as evangelists
 as pastors and teachers

for the equipping of the saints for the work of service
 to the building up of the body of Christ; until we
 all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the
 knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to
 the measure of the stature which belongs to the
 fulness of Christ."

The passage from the book of Ephesians singles out in particular apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, as equipping all members of the body of Christ for effective service and ministry. (cf I Corinthians 12:28-31).

Having within the body, therefore, some who are called to special ministries is not detrimental to the body of Christ; does not infringe upon the priesthood of all believers; does not inhibit some of the body from exercising their God given gifts. To the contrary, these ministries are God ordained and essential to the upbuilding of the body of Christ.

During the early years of the church there were a great number of special ministries. But as the church grew a more permanent ministry developed particularly through the appointing of elders and deacons. We read of Paul and Barnabas engaging in such appointments on their missionary journey:

"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." (Acts 14:23)

In the Pastoral epistles a similar pattern is perpetuated in that Paul instructs Titus saying:

"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you." (Titus 1:5)

In addition Timothy and Titus have a listing of qualifications and functions of the elders (bishops, overseers). Their function consisted essentially of a teaching, preaching, ruling, caring nature as expressed in Paul's words to Timothy:

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching."
(I Timothy 5:17)

It is evident from the scriptures that some way of acknowledging those appointed to special ministries in the body such as elders (and deacons) was generally practised. It is highly probable that such recognition was expressed by way of "laying on of hands".

Illustrative for us is the setting apart of Timothy for special ministry as described by Paul:

"Until I come pay attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation and teaching. Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery (body of elders)
(I Timothy 4:14).

The passage clearly indicates that Timothy commenced his ministry and special office through the receiving of a spiritual gift and by the recognition of God's calling by a group of elders including Paul (II Timothy 1:6). The prophetic utterance very likely was a prophetic word through which the divine call and endowment came to him. Such a ceremony is commonly referred to as ordination. It is an act by which the church recognizes publicly that God has called and endowed some member of the body of Christ for special ministry.

The exhortation to Timothy "not to lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share the responsibility for the sins of others", suggests that such practise of ordination was fairly common (I Timothy 5:22). The practise of laying on of hands, by which it was recognized that God had called for a special ministry, even at times on a temporary basis, is also expressed in Acts 13:2-3:

"And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away."

In similar fashion the seven brethren were set aside to serve at tables in Acts 6.

Such practise of ordination is rooted in the Old Testament. Joshua was commissioned (ordained) to succeed Moses as the servant of the Lord in the midst of his people (Numbers 27:19-23). The laying on of hands, therefore, symbolized the acknowledgement of a divine calling in setting apart for special ministry and frequently office. Although the New Testament has few descriptions of the laying on of hands, it can be inferred that it was a general practise. Leon Morris in his study Ministers of God indicates that it is disappointing that we have only

meager information on ordination. However he concludes with the statement "The probability is that elders were ordained with the laying on of hands of other elders, but we can scarcely say more" (page 79).

I believe that the New Testament gives to us guidelines and models for church ministry today. However, one must not look to the earliest beginnings of the church as a pattern for that ministry. The early church passed through its first phase when the apostolic ministry gave way to subsequent developments in the local church. The ministry of the elders became more permanent; they functioned as shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28); they taught and exhorted (I Timothy 3:2); they had oversight over the church of God (I Timothy 5:17); they prayed for the sick (James 5:14-15). Neither must we look to the first developments during the early years of the growth of Anabaptism, nor the first few years of the Mennonite Brethren Church, when an ordered ministry had not been established.

2. An Ordained Ministry is based on a Clear Calling

The specific ministry to which a believer is called is determined ultimately by the gifts he has received from God (Romans 12:3-8). We need to have "sound judgement" as we reflect on our gifts; we need to exercise them. Gifts sometimes need to be stirred up (II Timothy 1:6). Paul exhorts Timothy both to an engagement in faithful and vigorous teaching as well as in the exercise of godliness and piety. Walking with the Lord and serving Him makes clear to us God's personal call. Clowney, I believe is right when he writes:

"Most often the presence of such gifts of the Spirit creates a desire for their exercise. By them a man is drawn to the Word, to Christ, to men. For this reason a deep and sincere desire to enter the ministry is the commonest evidence of the Lord's calling. It is no sure criterion, however for gifts and desire are not always joined." (Clowney, God's Calling to the Ministry page 81)

Every local church is a place of ministry to test the gifts of our calling. Bible colleges and seminaries are also places to test one's calling to the ministry of the Word. They provide opportunities to be steeped in the Scriptures so as to understand the mind and will of God; they provide opportunities to develop habits of prayer and quiet time; they also provide opportunities to engage in practical Christian service and to interact with teachers and peers about a discernment of one's gifts.

The church must also recognize the clear calling of God in others. Paul is very explicit that his calling as an apostle came not through the agency of men

but through Jesus Christ and God the Father (Galatians 1:1). Nevertheless, he points out that his calling was recognized by his associates in the following words:

"But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to **the** uncircumcised, just as Peter with the gospel to the circumcised (for He Who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised; (Galatians 2:7-9)

The grace which God gives to His people for special ministry can be discerned by fellow Christians. When such grace is perceived, it should be recognized publicly and opportunity for the exercise of that gift for the growth of the body of the church should be given. Such discernment was also apparent when the Spirit separated Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13).

It is possible, and likely, that a personal call to the ministry may exist long before the church recognizes it. If one continues in faithfulness in one's life and in whatever opportunities of ministry the Word may open up before us, the church will in due time acknowledge God's grace to us. Close fellowship with the church at all times is therefore essential. Willingness to be active in the mission of the church is important: communicating the gospel to others; visiting the sick or the needy; showing concern for men who are lost in sin - all are part of the evidence of the reality of God's calling us into His service. The ultimate test again is God's life in us and the reality of His hand upon us:

"Neither private meditations nor personal counselling can prove your calling. That comes with God's blessing on your active service in the body of Christ." (Clowney, page 89)

Of fundamental importance is to note Paul's listing of the qualifications for elders. It is significant that he is more expansive in describing the spiritual qualifications than he is in describing the functions of the overseer. It is a "fine work" says Paul, "if any man aspires to the office of overseer (or bishop) (I Timothy 3:1). The ability to preach or teach is not to be divorced from the massive list of spiritual, moral and ethical qualifications as follows:

- a. above reproach
- b. husband of one wife
- c. temperate
- d. prudent
- e. respectable
- f. hospitable
- g. able to teach
- h. not given to wine
- i. not self-willed
- j. not quick tempered
- k. not pugnacious
- l. uncontentious

- m. gentle
- n. free from the love of money
- o. one who manages his own household well
- p. of good reputation with those outside the church
- q. love what is good
- r. just
- s. devout
- t. not a new convert

(I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-10)

Gene Getz makes the point well in his book The Measure of a Man when he sums up his thesis as follows:

"Paul did not say, look for men with the gift of pastor-teacher, or the gift of administration, or the gift of helps, or the gift of exhortation. In fact, there is very little reference to an ability or a skill. Rather, out of the twenty qualifications listed, nineteen have to do with a man's reputation, ethics, morality, temperament, habits, and spiritual and psychological maturity. And the other one has to do with his ability to lead his own family.

There is an unfortunate bewilderment among evangelicals regarding spiritual gifts. I've seen some of the men I work with struggle with this problem. Some have been given the idea that they must discover their spiritual gifts before they can begin serving Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, this is putting the cart before the horse. The Bible teaches that we must begin by becoming a man of God." (page 17)

3. An Ordained Ministry is to serve with authority

The church is not a fellowship without organization or without ministers in office to exercise authority. The Bible speaks of "elders who rule well" (I Timothy 5:17). It expects an overseer to "take care of the church of God" (I Timothy 3:5).

Believers are also admonished to appreciate those who rule over them and to esteem them highly. To the Thessalonians Paul writes:

"But we request of you brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work." (I Thessalonians 5:12-13)

In Hebrews we read:

"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you"(13:17).

Peter exhorts believers with the words,

"You younger men, likewise subject to your elders (I Peter 5:5).

What is the nature of this authority? Peter makes it quite clear that those who shepherd the flock are not to lord it over those in their charge (I Peter 5:3). It is similar to our Lord's exhortation that the disciples were not to lord it over the church as the gentiles do; to the contrary, they are encouraged to be servants even as "the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life for ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45).

Jesus prohibits His disciples from using titles Father, Rabbi, Master (Matthew 23:8-10). It is an admonition to those who are status seekers; who desire honor and titles. The Father - authority is one which seeks to exercise such authority over fellow Christians as a father relates to a dependent child. Pastors/teachers are not to seek to have fellow Christians become spiritually, slavishly dependent upon them. Every believer is to be spiritually and utterly dependent upon His heavenly Father. Part of the task of presenting fellow Christians mature in Christ is to make them dependent upon Christ. To help them trust in God to supply all their needs; Christ's lordship in the lives of fellow believers is not to be usurped by anyone.

Neither are the disciples to pose as Rabbis, posturing as authoritative Teachers in their own right. Nor are they to assume the title of master, that is to seek slavish obedience from others. God alone is to be Master, authoritative Teacher, the loving Father who knows and cares for all of our needs. The glory of the priesthood of all believers is not to be tarnished - all are to be brothers under their Lord! John Stott sums it up well in the following words:

"We have no desire to keep our church members tied to our own apron strings and running around us like children round their mother. There are in every church some weak and feeble souls who love to fuss around the minister and are constantly seeking interviews with him to consult him about their spiritual problems. This should be resisted, and that strenuously. Gently but firmly we should make it clear that God's purpose is that His children should look to Him as their Father, and not to men." (John Stott, The Preacher's Portrait, page 83)

This is not in contradiction to a warm fatherly caring relationship of which Paul writes to the Thessalonians:

"You know how like a father with his children we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to lead a life worthy to God" (I Thessalonians 2:13).

A love which cares can also discipline.

The nature of the authority of those ordained to special ministry is therefore declarative, not imperial, or legislative. Those called to the ministry of the Word do not have the power to create new laws or commandments. All the power they have is to declare the will of God to men in faithfulness to the Word of God.

They bring Christ's authority to men; they seek to bring men and women into the presence of God that they may hear Him and obey Him.

The extent of the power exercised by those ordained to the ministry will therefore depend on the extent to which they live under and by the Word of God. C. H. Spurgeon made a fitting comment when he said:

"It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in Scriptural language and your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is Bibline and the very essence of the Bible flows from you." (Quoted by J. Stott, The Preacher's Portrait, page 31)

Jeremiah expressed this attitude in his words,

"Thy words were found and I ate them, and Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart." (Jeremiah 15:16)

Ezekiel's authority lay in his faithfulness to the powerful Word of God.

Of him we read,

"Then He said to me, 'Son of man, eat what you find; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.'
So I opened my mouth, and He fed me this scroll.
And He said to me, 'Son of man, feed your stomach, and fill your body with this scroll which I am giving you. Then I ate it, and it was sweet as honey in my mouth.
Then He said to me, 'Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.'" (Ezekiel 3:1-4)

Through the ministry of the Word, the church exercises the keys of the Kingdom. It is exercising evangelical power as the gospel of salvation is preached to men. It exercises the keys of the Kingdom as it places the claims of Christ before men summoning them to repentance and faith. The church exercises a ministry of salvation not judgement. It warns of judgement if men reject Christ the Head.

The authority of the officers and shepherds in the church is not therefore a power to be "little dictators" or to establish little kingdoms. Authority resides only in Christ and in faithfulness to Him. The power to be exercised is ministerial; that is, to serve as ministers of Christ seeking to emulate Him Who came not to be ministered onto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many.

The evidence of the New Testament suggests that a plurality of elders (or a multiple ministry) obtained in the local churches. Titus was to ordain elders (plural) in every city (1:5). Paul called to Miletus the elders of the church (Acts 20:17). Peter writes to exhort the elders (plural) (I Peter 5:1-3). Elders as a plurality, were charged to shepherd the flock of God. Such an emphasis on the plurality of pastor/teacher rejects the idea of government of the church by one man. Plurality of elders is a safeguard against tyranny or abuse of power.

Singular authority in the church belongs to God alone; He places men into offices and functions by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). The rule and care of those whom the Lord has placed over others is to be respected by the congregation through public recognition of the fruitfulness of the gifts of Christ in the life of the minister. The stewardship of Christ's Word must be exercised with authority. Those whom the Lord has called must be heard and heeded as they declare the way of life and discharge their stewardship for rule and teaching.

Every Christian is called to minister in the name of Christ. Every Christian must show forth the virtues of God; every Christian must seek to minister to the needy, the sick and the lost. Whatever gifts God has given, and He has given some to all, must be exercised to the fullest extent. If those gifts include the call to the gospel ministry as elder/pastor/teacher, then the great commission must take priority over all other responsibilities. As Peter left his fishing boat, as Matthew left his tax-collecting activity, as Moody left his shoe salesmanship, so every believer must respond to the call of God. With Amos he says, "The lion has roared; Who will not fear? The Lord Jehovah has spoken; who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8)

Victor Adrian