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"Ordination" -- a discussion primer

Biblical and historical perspectives:

Jesus called his followers to be a family in which we are all brothers and sisters and no one plays the role of the "patriarch", a community of servants in which no one seeks personal greatness, and a body in which all members are important and only Christ is "Head." In the church all members are equally important, all are gifted, all are ministers (see esp. Matt. 23:8-12; Rom. 12:3-9). Yet some members of the family, some of the servants, some "body parts" are entrusted with the special responsibility to be "shepherds" / "elders" / "overseers". These are called to administer, to carry out the primary leadership tasks of teaching and equipping, where necessary to act authoritatively on Christ's behalf.

Over the centuries the Christian church has developed ways of discerning, testing, recognizing and empowering those members who become its leading ministers. An "ordination ceremony" (of one kind or another, depending on the tradition) usually culminates that process. Yet the New Testament does not seem to provide any clear precedent, let alone mandate, for such an "ordination".

I. Tim 4:14 (the so-called "ordination" of Timothy) is sometimes thought to provide such a precedent, but this verse links "laying on of hands" with gifting and prophecy, not with authority or office. Furthermore it is unlikely that the "laying on of hands" referred to installed Timothy into any office, and certainly not into the "office" of local church leader. Neither do 1 Tim. 5:22 or 2 Tim. 1:6 provide a clear foundation for the ceremony which the church today calls "ordination". Other New Testament texts use "laying on of hands" language (not "ordination" language) to refer to commissioning/appointing for a task. But the idea of installing into office, setting aside for fulltime ministry, or authorizing for sacred tasks seems absent.

Throughout history the church's "ordination ceremonies" have been understood to mean all these . . . and more. In some traditions they are viewed as prerequisites for administering sacraments or for preaching the Word. In many traditions they are accompanied by special rights and titles and they almost always contribute to hierarchical thinking and to a "clergy" / "laity" split. All of these Jesus and the New Testament seem to have tried to prevent.

Most scholars now recognize that there is a great gulf between the teaching of the New Testament and the practice of the church with respect to "ordination". Some are seeking creative alternatives. Should not we who affirm the giftedness of all believers and who (at least in theory) de-emphasize "sacramentalism" be among those who follow a better path?

Questions for reflection:

What are appropriate biblical ways of recognizing and commissioning those in the church who are called and gifted to lead? Should we dispense with "ordination" language and "ordination ceremonies" altogether (as some have suggested)? Or should we ordain far more people (as others have suggested)? How can we discern and empower some to lead without making them into "clergy" and the others by definition into "laity" (meaning "ignorant/ungifted")? How can we be faithful to what Jesus taught about leadership (e.g. Matt. 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45) and at the same time allow gifted visionary leaders to help the church re-capture the dynamic of the first century church?

TIA

ORDINATION

INTRODUCTION:

- The "Discussion Primer": to get us started thinking!
- Growing consensus: N.T. does not provide precedent nor mandate for the kinds of ceremonies that we now call "ordination."
- The whole Bible, not a few disputed texts, should guide us.
- Where does the Bible give direct guidance for local church leadership?

OLD TESTAMENT LEADERS:

- Anecdote: "Abraham as a model for church leaders"
- Patriarchs, "Charismatic Leaders", Judges, Kings, Priests, Prophets point to Jesus and beyond him to the CHURCH, not to church leaders.
- Old Testament leaders "lifted out from among the people"
 - Not so New Testament church leaders.

NEW TESTAMENT LEADERS:

- New Testament "heros" are apostles, deacons, missionaries, evangelists, or apostolic representatives (but not local church leaders)
- Local churches were led by a team of pastors / elders / bishops.
- Primary apostles: official, authoritative and transitional role. These are comparable to O.T. prophets and part of foundation of church.
- Secondary apostles and apostolic representatives are missionaries and church planters, but not models for local church leadership.
- Church's Foundation: Prophets and Apostles with Christ as Cornerstone.
- These normative guides we find today in the Scriptures (cf. 2 Peter 3:2)

O.T. TITLES THAT ARE TAKEN UP TO REFER TO N.T. CHURCH LEADERS

- "Shepherds" "elders" "teachers; the ones that are not titles.
- New Testament leadership "titles" are not really titles.
- SHEPHERDS: focus on feeding, protecting, binding up wounds.
 - ELDERS: focuses on the wisdom that comes from maturity.
 - OVERSEER: focuses on helping to see the larger picture, focus vision.
- Primary Task: to order all the other gifted ministers of the church.
- The focus is on service, not lordship; gifts, not guaranteed rights; effective ministry, not position or career; empowering the church, not keeping it in check; working as part of a team.
- Beyond that: lots of room for creativity, adapting to a cultural context, learning from those who have found effective methods.

WHAT DO THE "ORDINATION TEXTS" SAY?

- I Timothy 4:14 (written by Paul to his apostolic representative)
- Not about the role of pastor/elder/bishop; not about office at all.
 - About giftedness and task; no basis for a theology of ordination.
- I Timothy 5:22 (instructing Timothy concerning laying on hands)
- Perhaps about commissioning; more likely about restoring sinners (not necessarily leaders); about discernment not authority or status.
- II Timothy 1:6 (fan into flame the gift!)
- "The gift" might be a charismatic endowment, more likely faith.
 - Probably about Timothy's initiation into the Christian faith

Other "laying-on-of-hands" texts:

- Some about commissioning to a task, some about initiation into faith, some about re-direction into a new ministry.
- None are about local church leadership; none are about a lifelong call to fulltime ministry; none are about status or title.

The phrase "laying on of hands" seems to mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes the focus is on commissioning, sometimes on blessing, sometimes on symbolizing or effecting healing or some other spiritual work. The word "ordination" is not to be found in the entire New Testament.

SUGGESTIONS (for discussion purposes)

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IF we ARE going to ordain . . .

1. Let us not link ordination to the question whether someone receives a salary from the church.
2. Let us be clear that a call from the church into leadership ministry is at least as valid and trustworthy as a sensed internal call on the part of the one who is to be ordained.
3. Let us be careful not to think that those ordained are being lifted out from among the church to stand above it with the right to pronounce to the church what must be done.
4. Let us not think of it as a one-time test of orthodoxy and faithfulness, guaranteeing that the person tested is now beyond the need to be discerned and corrected.
5. Let us not think that the ordination ceremony represents a call to ministry (per se) and a gifting for ministry. All Christians are called to ministry and gifted for ministry.
6. Let us not imagine that the people we ordain become substitutes for the people of God, people who go to God for us and then come back and tell us what he says.
7. It should not be viewed as something that gives a lifetime status or title.
8. Let us seriously consider changing the name of our ceremonies of ordination to commissionings.

IF we are NOT going to ordain . . .

9. Let us not stop discerning those people gifts that God gives the church, so that the whole body can be equipped to be ministers and priests.
10. Let us make sure that it is not because we are not willing to submit to each other. Whatever decision we make about ordination should be motivated by a desire to learn to mutually submit to Christ, the Head, and (under Him) to each other.

11. If ordination symbolizes that . . .
 - paid staff or elected officers are the church's only ministers
 - ministry is a matter of position more than function or service
 - leaders are beyond the need to be accountable to the church. . . THEN, let us stop ordaining and start "de-frocking".
12. Whatever we choose to do, let us find ways for the church to clearly say that it blesses and commissions people for the tasks of leadership.
13. If ordination means that we are receiving with joy and thankfulness the leadership gifts God gives to the church, and pledging ourselves to seek with them and with all God's saints the best possible ways of being the church, then let us ordain with great celebration and expectancy.