

A THEOLOGY OF ORDINATION

As the family of God on Earth, the church is both called and equipped to carry out the will of God on Earth. The Holy Spirit imbues individuals with spiritual gifts in order to edify the body of Christ and fulfill the gospel commission (1 Peter 2:9; Ephesians 4:11–13). Upon being baptized, all are called into the service of Christ, anointed, and equipped by the Holy Spirit for service through the dispensing of spiritual gifts (Acts 8:14–17; Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11).

MULTIPLE MINISTRIES

The Scriptures identify specialized ministries intended to meet the structural needs of the organized body. The offices of deacon and elder arose organically from the growth of the early church. They were established in order to adequately meet the need for responsible leadership and service. Deacons and elders functioned primarily within the local church setting (1 Timothy 3). Others served as minister-evangelists, traversing large regions in order to effectively proclaim and teach the gospel, intent on establishing, stabilizing, and growing the church (Acts 6:1–6; 13:1–3; Ephesians 4:11). These specialized responsibilities stand out due to their being preceded by the laying on of hands.

THE CALL

The genuine call to service ministry is divinely initiated and individually accepted. God impresses upon one's heart the sincere conviction of having been personally summoned into God's service. The call to

service ministry is an invitation to join in effective partnership with God and God's church. The timing and circumstances of the call may vary (e.g., *in utero*, childhood, youth, or adulthood, as seen respectively with Jeremiah, Samuel, Daniel, and Amos).

PURPOSE OF ORDINATION

The gospel minister is entrusted with the solemn duty to serve as the representative of God and the church, proclaiming and teaching sound doctrine, exhorting others to respond to God's invitation for salvation, and administering church ordinances. Being mindful of God's station as Author and Ruler of the church, the church affirms God's declared and revealed intent, careful to observe the evidence, prove all things, and authenticate an individual's call to service ministry (Matthew 7:17–20; Romans 12:2). What is individually received must be corporately verified. Having opportunity to observe an individual's character, deportment, and abilities, the church retains the responsibility for substantiating and affirming the genuineness of a claimed call into gospel ministry service. The church is also responsible for officially designating and identifying its representatives.

Ordination serves to formally sanction an individual for the purpose of fulfilling the church's global mission (Matthew 24:14; 28:19–20). The worldwide body accepts in good faith what has been locally ratified (e.g., Paul's introductory letter exhorting congregations to cordially receive Timothy, as he had been properly trained and

commissioned). While ordination grants special sanction, it does not imbue the individual with added ability or spiritual acumen. It does not elevate the recipient above the laity nor grant any special dispensation of grace. Yet, ordination ought not to be trivialized as an automatic process following a set duration of effort and training. It can neither be demanded nor casually dispensed.

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR ORDINATION

The modern-day rite of ordination should be firmly grounded upon biblical concepts and practice. Concepts inherent to ordination are evidenced during the early formation of ancient Israel. The Bible documents multiple instances of people consecrated for sacred office and items consecrated for sacred use (Exodus 28:41; 40:9–16; Numbers 7:1; Deuteronomy 10:8). Their selection employs verbs such as anoint, consecrate, set apart, and appoint. The practice of laying hands upon an individual can be traced to the dispensing of the patriarchal blessing (Genesis 48) and for publicly appointing spiritual leaders (Numbers 27:22–23; Deuteronomy 34:9; 1 Kings 19:15–16; Acts 14:23).

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

The church acknowledges God's supreme authority to choose, equip, and commission individuals for service in accordance with the divine will. God selects whomever God wills, wherever God wills, whenever God wills. God's actions cannot be forecast except God reveals them. The church should

consciously refrain from assuming restrictions on God to utilize any part of the creation for the advancement of the gospel (cf. Numbers 22:27–28; Matthew 21:15; Luke 19:39–40).

Thus, the body of Christ guards itself against the human inclination to pre-determine the plausibility or potential of an individual for service in gospel ministry based upon maleness. In determining qualification for ordination, the focus centers on spiritual gifts rather than gender (Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:4–11). The church thereby implements a means for testing qualities germane to each spiritual gift while acknowledging that God is no respecter of persons. The ministry of Ellen White within the Seventh-day Adventist Church provides helpful insight. Her acknowledged spiritual authority as God's spokesperson serves to insulate the church against assumptions of gendered limits pertaining to leadership within the body of Christ.

SERVICE MINISTRY

Gospel ministry should be viewed as service—ministering to the body, as opposed to commanding authority (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:25–27). The human tendency to view pastoral ministry as a position of power generally works to politicize the office. Such an inclination degrades into jealously guarding access to power. Ordination constitutes the recognition of one's call to serve within the body of Christ, but not to lord over it. Where spiritual authority is conferred, humility must govern those entrusted with it.

Ordination might best be viewed as certification. Having been called through God's election, a candidate becomes certified by God's church and commissioned for service in God's cause.

SIMPLICITY OF METHOD

The rite of ordination need not be infused with pomp. The example of Christ and the New Testament church portray uncomplicated simplicity. After prayerful deliberation, individuals are summoned, dutifully charged with a task, and sent forth following prayer and the laying on of hands (e.g., Mark 3:14; Acts 6:6; 13:2–3). The emphasis rests upon a formal commissioning for specialized service.

SIGNIFICANCE

Ordination might best be viewed as certification. Having been called through God's election, a candidate becomes certified by God's church and commissioned for service in God's cause. Ordination specifically to gospel ministry indicates that the recipient values and responds to God's call with a determination for lifetime service. Ordination is unsuitable for those who view gospel ministry as an

occasional vocation or deem it a temporary profession. The responsibility of gospel ministry ought not be carelessly taken up nor casually put down. Ordination implies a determination for life service. Similar to the institution of marriage, the ordained minister is wedded to God's assignment.

While constituting an official call to duty, the laying on of hands does not indicate an elevated status. Care is needed to preserve humility, lest the temptation arise to view ministers as inherently different or spiritually superior. The minister remains within the body, whereas Christ reigns as head of the body. All members receive equal love and considerate attention from God, regardless of church station. Acknowledging the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9), the prayers of the clergy are no more efficacious than those of any other faithful and sincere supplicant.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

In summation, we assert:

Ordination is a formal acknowledgment and authentication of one's call to service ministry by God. Authentication should be understood as ratifying what only God can dispense. Ordination neither supersedes God's call nor enhances it. Ordination affirms the genuineness of the call as having borne the proper fruit of the Holy Spirit's work. God initiates the call and equips the recipient for enacting it. God's person accepts the call. God's people affirm the call. ■



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