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# A Call to Reassess once more our Doctrine of Ordination

JAMES D. G. DUNN

*The Methodist Conference accepted a Report on Ordination in 1974. But developments since then have underlined the necessity of another look at our doctrine of ordination, including some of the basic theological issues touched on in that Report.*

## **Why is ordination an issue?**

1) IN most recent discussion of ministry there has been a disturbing tension or discord between, on the one hand, the still strongly maintained traditional teaching on the ministry and priesthood given through ordination, and, on the other, the more recent reaffirmation of the priesthood of all believers and the ministry of the whole people of God. Typical is the treatment of the World Council of Churches' revised text on *Ministry*. The first few paragraphs make what unfortunately give the strong impression of being little more than token assertions about 'the calling of the whole people of God'. The rest is devoted to 'the ordained ministry' — more than 90 per cent of the whole document! How do the two categories of ministry relate to each other? The question cannot be answered without inquiring into the doctrine of ordination. Is it unjust to harbour the suspicion that opening paragraphs on the ministry of all believers are in reality just an afterthought tacked on by those for whom real ministry is the ordained ministry? The suspicion can be removed only by examining the doctrine and practice of ordination once more. How can the ministry of the whole people of God be so unproblematic as to deserve such scanty treatment? Ministry so lightly treated is ministry lightly regarded. A concept of ordination which makes such a difference between ministries prompted by the same Spirit must be subjected to fresh examination.

No sentence in *Towards Visible Unity* was more disturbing and more indicative of what is at stake than this: 'Ordination denotes entry into the apostolic and God-given ministry' (para. 5.2.3.1). What value does that leave to 'the ministry of the laity', 'the ministry of the whole people of God'? That sentence was taken over from the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) 1973 Statement on *Ministry and Ordination* (para. 14). In the ARCIC Statement it followed the assertion that the ordained ministry 'is not an extension of the common Christian priesthood but belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit' (para. 13), which in turn is obviously influenced by Vatican II's claim that 'there is an *essential difference* between the faithful's priesthood in common and the priesthood of the ministry' (*Lumen Gentium* para. 10 — my emphasis). Do we accept such a clear distinction between 'the ministry of the faithful' and 'the ordained ministry'? Do we accept the theology of ordination which undergirds it? Does ordination mark off two kinds of ministry 'essentially different' from each other? Those of us outside the Catholic tradition are in danger of a serious double-think on this whole issue. The doctrine of ordination needs to be looked at again.

The 1974 Faith and Order Report felt justified in giving attention to ordination because of this same renewed emphasis on 'the whole people of God as the agent of Christ's continuing ministry in the world'. In the event, however, insufficient attention was given to the relation between the ministry of the whole people and particular ministries within it (some marked by ordination, others not). The concept of the ordained minister as a 'representative person' was taken as the key. But the theology of 'representative persons' within the new covenant of Christ needs a good deal more thought. For example, is 'representative character' what ordination gives? — authority to represent Christ to the congregation (including 'Christ's *Lordship* of his people', according to *Towards Visible Unity* para. 5.2.2.4), authority to represent the church before the world, authority to represent the universal church within the local church? But then we must ask, Is not *all* ministry in the spirit of love a sign and expression of the presence and ministry of Christ in the church? Should the baptized be regarded as in principle any less representative of the church to the world than the ordained? And how can the rich diversity of the corporate life of the Spirit at the universal level be adequately represented by one individual? — according to Paul it is the Spirit of Christ in his manifold manifestations of ministry which constitutes a local gathering as the body of Christ. In short, the 1974 Report did not extend to an adequate theological analysis of this fundamental issue of the relation between ordained ministry and unordained ministry. It is this task, the theological reassessment of the doctrine of ordination in the light of the renewed recognition that *all* God's people are called to ministry, which is even more urgent today than it was in 1974.

2) Other contemporary developments raise the same issue. The continued debate about the diaconate has in effect put a question mark against the traditional assumption within the wider church that the normative model for ministry is the three-fold order of bishop, priest and deacon. Methodists have not accepted the three-fold order, but we have accepted, too uncritically in my opinion, the doctrine of ordination which goes with it. No reassessment of the order of ordained ministry is complete without a reassessment of the doctrine of ordination.

The current wider interest in revitalizing the order of deacon has now been reflected within Methodism in the recent (1982) proposal of the Division of Ministries to develop a new lay order of ministry (= the diaconate). This proposal follows from the suggestion 'that the time has now come to consider the over all pattern of ministry which is emerging in the church', and from the recognition of 'stresses between ordained and lay ministries that have tended to be destructive in the church's life' (*The Development of Ministries* paras. 1.6, 2.1). The logical conclusion is that a fresh consideration of 'the over all pattern of ministry' must include a rethink of the basic distinction within that over all pattern, between ordained and lay ministry, must include, that is to say, a rethink of the theology of ordination which requires such a distinction in the first place. The proposal of a lay order embracing diversified ministries has much to commend it, but can its theological rationale be maintained and explained without *starting* from a reconsideration of the doctrine of ordination?

One might simply add that, although the debate on the ordination of women has been long settled in Methodism, it is still not sufficiently clear to

many that the issue is as much about ordination as about women. As others have pointed out, the problem is not the ordination of *women*, so much as the *ordination* of men. A reassessment of our doctrine and practice of ordination could thus be a contribution of great ecumenical importance for several questions of current significance.

3) One of the most important questions which the Charismatic Renewal is posing to the older streams of Christianity focuses precisely in this area. It calls the wider church to a fresh appreciation of the charismatic dimension of ministry. The World Council of Churches has now invited churches to consider carefully the potential contribution of the charismatic movement to the renewal of the whole church, and to 'publicly recognize' a wider range of charisms given to the church. But to take proper account of the charismatic dimension of *all* ministry is to raise the question, Why is *some* ministry marked off from *other* ministries by a ceremony of ordination? And if charism mean ministry, as Paul insists (1 Cor. 12:4-7), why is ordination attached to only *some* charisms? Why, in short, the still fundamental distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity'? If we are to make a serious effort to hear what God is saying to us through the charismatic renewal we must look again at ordination.

4) Perhaps above all, the Covenant Proposals made the significance of ordination an issue once more. It was clear from the correspondence columns of the *Recorder* that underlying the misgivings of many Methodists was the strong suspicion that acceptance of the historic episcopate inevitably involves a *narrowing* in the concept of valid ministry. To focus the question of valid ministry on episcopacy, however, is to miss the more fundamental issue. It is *ordination* as usually understood which restricts the concept of ministry, not episcopacy. Our present theology and practice of ordination is *already* a *more serious narrowing* of our concept of ministry than would be the acceptance of bishops. The challenge of the Covenant in effect was whether we could maintain, extend and enlarge our concept and practice of ministry while at the same time accepting episcopacy as part of that enlargement. The two are not incompatible (so I welcomed the challenge and supported the Covenant). But can we have a broader concept of ministry without a broader concept of ordination? To the extent that 'valid ministry' is dependent on 'valid ordination', to that extent any further development, ecumenically or denominationally, must depend in part at least on a rethink about the meaning and scope of ordination.

In particular, *Recorder* correspondents quite justifiably tied the issue of the historic episcopate into the issue of laymen conducting Holy Communion (lay presidency of the Eucharist). Does a valid sacrament depend on the celebrant's having been ordained or not? The question is one of principle and a reply in terms of 'maintaining good order' is not an adequate response (is 'good order' threatened when a congregation invites a respected 'layman' to preach and to preside at the Lord's Supper?). Such questions are being asked not only by Methodists, but also by Anglicans like A. E. Harvey, *Priest or President?* (SPCK 1975) and Roman Catholics like E. Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change* (SCM 1981). In view of our traditions we ought not to be behindhand in pressing for such questions to be opened up for re-examination at every level, including not least the level of theological principle. A doctrine of ordination which inhibits the celebration of our

corporate life together in Christ to any unnecessary degree must be thoroughly scrutinized and corrected.

### The issues involved

In a brief treatment like this I cannot go into detail. But the following are certainly among the more important issues, though not in any order of importance.

1) The authority and interpretation of what the New Testament says in this area. Anyone reading the New Testament with care would be astonished that Christians could so readily talk of an order of priesthood within the church. Our basic concept of ordained clergy is, for example, as foreign to 'the epistle of priesthood' (the letter to the Hebrews) as the Mormons' belief in a continuing priesthood of Aaron and priesthood of Melchizedek within the church. Other interpretations of doubtful validity focus on the applicability of Old Testament patterns of ministry to the new covenant, the possibility of sharing or representing Christ's priestly office, the role of 'the twelve' and the meaning of apostleship, leadership of the earliest Christian communities and the emergence of the three-fold order of ministry.

2) Is ordination a *sacrament*? The language used in the World Council's revised text on *Ministry* speaks of it precisely in the language appropriate to a sacrament. And our own practice of ordination gives it the weight of a sacrament. But do we mean ordination to be regarded as in effect a *third* sacrament? Or if it is less 'weighty' (a sacrament in a much broader sense), why is its practice more restrictively regulated than the practice of baptism? And should we not be prepared to recognize other services like Covenant renewal and commissioning of stewards as sacramental in just the same sense? But then what are the corollaries of such a recognition for our concept of ordained ministry as something crucially different from all other ministry?

3) Is ordination for *life*? Why have churches been so unwilling to think of ordinations which are more limited in time and scope? We have good precedents — the seven in Acts 6, Barnabas and Paul set apart as missionaries of the church in Antioch for the 'first missionary journey' (Acts 13-14), the emissaries (=apostles!) of the churches to take the collection to Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:19). To treat ordination as setting apart to life-long ministry is to confuse it with baptism. Ordination is more appropriate as setting apart to *specific* ministries — lengthy or short, wide-ranging or limited. The 1974 Faith and Order Report is open to criticism at this point too. For example, should a commitment to some short term ministry, a particular commission say, be discounted as less real and as less whole-hearted than commitment to a life-long ministry by singling out only the latter for ordination? Is there in principle any difference between the setting apart of a Sunday School teacher and the ordination of a minister? If not, our doctrine and practice of ordination should demonstrate this.

4) Is ordination for *full-time ministry only*? The concept of 'non-stipendiary ministry' is gaining ground. Should we not be looking at it more closely? — *and* at the implications for our doctrine of ordination? What is the doctrine of ordination which says in effect that the *norm* for ministry is the full-time professional? If 'ordained ministers' can be in other employment, why is it so impossible to conceive of trained 'laymen' with an important ministry for the church being 'ordained'? What is this mystique of

ordination? What is the theology of ordination involved?

5) The present model of ordination perpetuates the ideal of *mono-ministry*, of the omnicompetent clergyman, able to be leader, teacher, pastor, intercessor, evangelist, administrator, etc. Such ministries were originally fulfilled by a *variety* of people. Should it not be possible for someone who is gifted in only one or two of such ministries to have that ministry recognized and encouraged in a form of ordination? Does not ordination as presently practised enhance the danger of mono-ministry and of prelacy?

6) The problem of ordination focuses most uncomfortably on the issue of who can and who cannot officiate at Holy Communion. The more we confine presidency of the Eucharist to the ordained ministry, the more difficult is it to escape the charge that our ordained ministry *has* in fact a 'peculiarly priestly character'. We cannot escape this problem, since it is an undoubted historical fact that in the early centuries the idea of priesthood became inextricably bound up with the doctrine of the Lord's Supper: ordination became ordination to the priesthood precisely because it was only as a *priest* that the individual could officiate at the Eucharist. It follows that a practice which more and more confines leadership of Communion to the ordained ministry cannot easily escape the charge of maintaining a 'priesthood which belongs exclusively to a particular order' (despite the Deed of Union). If it *is* simply a matter of preserving good order, and there is in fact no other theological principle at stake, then we should at least state clearly that *in principle* officiating at Holy Communion need not be confined to the ordained ministry. And if that principle is to count for anything, as it must if we are to be true to the Deed of Union, we must ensure that the principle is maintained *in practice*, otherwise one of the key points of our theology will indeed be sacrificed to what on any reckoning should be the less demanding constraints of 'good order'. And by 'practice' I do not mean simply *ad hoc* authorizations of lay persons to make up the shortfall of ordained ministers. For what then would happen to the principle if the supply of ordained ministers increased and eliminated the need for such stop-gap measures? The principle surely cannot have the status required by the Deed of Union until and unless there are regular occasions (carefully controlled as needs be) when ordained ministers are present to receive the sacrament from lay celebrants. I might simply add that at this point we have encouraged a dangerous theological rift between word and sacrament. Compared with our scrupulosity over Holy Communion we are positively cavalier in our allowing non-ordained people to preach. And yet, far more danger and damage is done both to faith *and* good order by poor preaching of the word than by poor administration of the sacraments.

### **In the aftermath of the Covenant**

The failure of the Covenant could easily become an excuse for reviving the old slogan: 'Theology divides; worship unites'. Discussions on the theology of ministry have been so exasperatingly fruitless in practice that many may be tempted to leave theological issues on one side and to concentrate on schemes of practical co-operation at the grass roots. Such an either-or would be an understandable, but regrettable reaction. Theology and worship are mutually interdependent and we allow them to fall apart at our peril. The

present impasse will only be surmounted when local practice *and* rethought theology *together* exert such an overwhelming pressure on other traditions that they are forced to recognize broader concepts and practices of ministry as willed by God.

Fundamental to the theology of ministry is the theology of ordination. Any theological rethink of ministry cannot avoid giving early and detailed consideration once more to the doctrine of ordination. At this point at any rate the failure of the Covenant may in the end turn out to be a blessing in disguise. For there was some danger that acceptance of the Covenant would have inhibited the pursuit of such fundamental questions which might have threatened the hardly won agreement. Now however, the only way forward at the theological level is to return to first principles, to the basic concepts of church and ministry. Here, I would suggest, the starting point can no longer be the concept of 'the ordained ministry' as something given and axiomatic, as so often in the past. The doctrine of ordination itself is one of the basic presuppositions which must be rethought in the light of scripture and of church history past and present. Methodism with its own distinctive character and history can make a valuable contribution to the church at large by leading the way in that reassessment.