

Ordination: Does it fit?

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In 2009 Baptists celebrate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist Church. We've come a long way in 400 years. From a small group of English dissenters fleeing their home land to avoid persecution, Baptists today represent the largest protestant communion in the world. An occasion such as a 400th anniversary will be a time to recall our roots and to review the distinctive elements of our ecclesiology. Within the mosaic of church life around the world what is peculiar or unique about Baptist ecclesiology? Our forebears were radical dissenters against religious status quo, and many paid dearly for their convictions. Do we still hold to their radical views, or are we less distinctive these days?

Most Baptist Unions and Conventions practice a form of ordination of pastors. Meanings of words may vary but the language is fairly uniformed. But does it really fit our Baptist ecclesiology, or as the title Albert L. Vail's provocative book from 1915 suggests, do we have "*A Roman Fly in the Baptist Ointment*"?

By definition, "ordination" comes from the Latin root *ordo* or *order*, meaning literally to arrange in order or rank. In its historical development the word came to mean the taking of office or orders. In Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions ordination is considered a sacrament, by which special grace is imparted. Clearly Protestant traditions do not hold to such a high view. So what do Baptists mean when they use the term?

The purpose of this paper is not to attempt an answer to this question. That is a task for brighter minds and needs to follow the trail of robust dialogue. The purpose of this paper is merely to identify questions worthy of response. There will likely be varied responses, and the ability to live and work together within the tension of differing views is one of our strengths. Perhaps the questions that follow offer a framework for ongoing dialogue.

A doctrinal question: Does the concept of ordination conflict with our understanding of the priesthood of all believers?

The priesthood of all believers is arguable a central plank upon which Baptist ecclesiology is constructed. Popularisation of the priesthood of all believers as a doctrine is generally credited to Martin Luther, although from how his later ecclesiology developed it is less clear what he actually had in mind. He certainly didn't agree with the radical Anabaptist view of elimination of a clergy class. Luther argued against the medieval distinction between "spiritual" and "temporal", with the ordained clergy being the "spiritual" and the rest being "of this world." By contrast Luther argued that every baptised Christian is a "priest" or "spiritual" in the eyes of God.

However, the term undoubtedly opens the door for a low view of clergy hierarchy. Baptists have always stressed the equal and mutual priesthood of all members of the church. Each Christian has unfettered access to God, in the Old Testament understanding of priesthood; similarly each Christian is able to represent God's grace and activity toward others. In Baptist thinking there is no theoretical or practical distinction in status between a pastor and any other member of the church. The question arises, therefore, whether the concept of separate "orders" for those appointed as pastors or ministers militates against the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.

A theological question: To what extent does the institutional model of church, with distinctions between clergy and laity, reflect the movement Jesus began?

In a post-modern worldview we're allowed to ask questions that otherwise might be avoided. Our ecclesial 'eggs' are well and truly 'scrambled' after 2000 years, and it may not be possible to unscramble them. Anglican theologian, Leon Morris, dared to pose this question at the beginning of his study on formal offices of ministry in the life of the church. Was the formulation of an organized system, with officers and specified duties and rituals, something Jesus instituted, or was this foreign to Jesus original intent when he spoke of building his church (Matthew 16:18)? While Jesus spoke of the formulation of an *ekklesia* that would reflect the values of God's kingdom come on earth, do the origins of the church as we know it today actually go back to Jesus, or do they reflect the best intent of those who succeeded Jesus' mission?¹

Given Jesus teaching on leadership and servanthood, as contradistinctive to models of the Gentiles, did he really envisage a community wherein only certain people had authority to perform ceremonial functions, and others were merely passive? Or was the model of church Jesus envisaged somewhat more participatory and less hierarchical?

A pneumatological question: Did Pentecost alter the paradigm for Holy Spirit empowerment for ministry?

The events of Pentecost were significant in the launch of the church, as foretold by Jesus prior to his ascension. The disciples were to wait in Jerusalem until they were imbued with power from the Holy Spirit. Pentecost marks a distinct change in the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of human beings. The Apostle Peter clearly interpreted the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel.ⁱⁱ Prior to Pentecost imbuement with Holy Spirit power was sporadic and only occurred in the lives of specially anointed individuals. At Pentecost the *modus operandi* of the Holy Spirit altered. No longer was manifestation of power for ministry limited to a select few or a particular class of people; power to serve was severally distributed and across all classes of people – men and woman, young and old, all people.

How might the Apostle Peter view the reduction of authority to minister to a select few in the church on account of their theological education and ministerial training? To what extent are models of ministry that propagate clergy separation, and elite special authority, in conflict with the effects of Pentecost? Did not Pentecost represent a death blow to the Old Testament concept of an elite priestly class, in favour of every Christian being a potential vessel through whom the Holy Spirit can minister?

A historical question: How significant do we hold the dissenting views of the earliest Baptists who argued against a clergy dominated church?

Pioneer Baptist leaders held to a low view of clergy ministry. Perhaps the first incident of Baptist conflict occurred between John Smyth and Thomas Helwys shortly after the formation of the first Baptist Church. Smyth apparently doubted the efficacy of his own baptism and reached the conclusion that what he did to himself, and subsequently to others, was invalid. He came to believe his baptism should more properly have been administered by the Mennonites who had a more developed ecclesiology.ⁱⁱⁱ Helwys countered: “. . . *there is no succession or privilege in holy things . . .*” and that precedence for their 1609 baptism could be drawn from John the Baptizer who “. . . *being unbaptized preached the baptism of repentance.*”^{iv} The conflict was so serious Smyth was eventually excommunicated from the fledgling church he had helped form.^v In Helwys’ mind there was no special authority for the ordinance vested in the person administering it. This was a defiant challenge to the view that holy ordinances or sacraments could only be performed by ordained clergy, as representative of apostolic succession. Helwys went further in his 1611 Declaration:

The Church . . . though they be but two or three, have Christ given them, with all the means of their salvation (Matthew 18:20; Romans 8:32; 1 Corinthians 3:22) are the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27) and a whole church (1 Corinthians 14:23) and therefore may, and ought, when they come together, to pray, prophesy, break bread, and administer in all the holy ordinances, although as yet they have no Officers, or that their Officers should be in Prison, sick, or by any other means hindered from the Church (1 Peter 4:10; 2:5).^{vi}

Church officers or ministers were not unimportant in Helwys' view, but if they were absent for some reason the church was still competent to function. A 1948 statement by the Baptist Union of Great Britain makes a similar point:

Any member of the church may be authorized by it, on occasion, to exercise the functions of the ministry, in accordance with the principle of the priesthood of all believers, to preach the word, to administer baptism, to preside at the Lord's Table, to visit, and comfort or rebuke members of the fellowship.^{vii}

How does this view of common priesthood of every church member fit with the concept of special rights and privileges of ordained ministry?

An ecclesiological question: To what extent does ordained ministry conflict with the Apostle Paul’s teaching about spiritual gifts?

If the Apostle Paul were to visit our churches would he recognise them? In his letters to churches in Rome, Corinth and Ephesus Paul developed the analogy of a multi-faceted human body in describing the operational function of the church. All parts of the body are essential and have a part to play in the correct functioning of the body. No one part is to be regarded as more important than others. There is mutual honour and respect for different parts of the body. Paul was at pains to point out that all parts are not equal in function, but all are necessary.

Clearly Paul was not suggesting a church that was leaderless or that every member has the same capacity for ministry. Offices such as pastor or teacher or prophet or elder are not unnecessary. Quite the reverse; they are all the more necessary in order to facilitate high level participation by church members in the varied ministerial function of the church. How, therefore, does a model of church life that limits certain ecclesial functions to a select few with special “orders” compare with Paul’s ecclesiology? Does the concept of “special vocation” or “separate orders” for a clergy class tend towards high passivity on the part of congregation members, who merely assemble to watch the professionals perform?

A nomenclature question: Have we confused ordination with credentialing of ministers and the establishing of best-practice standards?

Is the Baptist use of the term “ordination” consistent with its etymology and theology, or have we confused it with something else? In Catholic theology ordination is a sacrament of the church. The *ordinand* is male (only), trained, formed, tested and at the end of a defined process formally separated as a member of special “orders” within the church. The conferring of ordination is said to mystically alter the very essence of the person from then on. The status is a life-long vocation (unless he resigns or is defrocked) irrespective of the role he plays in the church.

Could it be that Baptists have borrowed ordination as a term for the credentialing of pastors who have achieved a certain standard of competence or education? Having been recognised for their ability or sense of spiritual gifting they are commended as competent ministers of the Gospel within their denominational grouping.

Raising of standards for pastoral leadership is a worthy ideal. Nothing but good that comes from raising high the bar of ministerial competence. The question remains, however, whether the language of ordination truly fits what we do. Could it be that Baptists are misusing a theological term without cognisance of its meaning or implication? Is this why some Baptist denominations use terminology like Accreditation or Registration, rather than ordination?

Another implication of nomenclature is the title “Reverend” to distinguish ordained persons from those who are not. At what point is a pastor able to employ such a distinguishing title? Is it from the point at which they are formally ordained by their denomination, or at the point of commissioning within their local church? The use of the title is so widespread within the Baptist communion, as it is in other denominations, that it may not easily be discontinued, but it does beg the question as to meaning. Is the title “Reverend” appropriate or defensible within Baptist ecclesiology, or more importantly within the model of church taught by the New Testament?

A vocational question: Is ordination a life calling or is it delimited to function?

In a Catholic world view the concept of ordination is life-long. Priestly ordination is a vocation, not merely a career. Origins of this view have merit when properly understood, but it raises questions for Baptists as to whether such a theological position sits well.

For hundreds of years Baptist pastors have testified to a sense of divine calling to “the Ministry.” This calling has been followed with deep reverence for the

mission of the church, and often at considerable personal cost. This paper does not question the sanctity or validity of such a “calling.” However, it does question whether a “call” to pastoral ministry is always or necessarily a lifetime commitment. Could it be that serving as a pastor is for an episode in a person’s life, rather than an irrevocable life time commitment? In a Catholic worldview: once a priest; always a priest. There is no such thing as retirement. The priest may no longer actively serve in a parish, but the right or authority to do so is not related to specific appointment or function. Is this how Baptists view the function of pastoral ministry?

Thinking theologically, are there not a range of vocational “callings” across the body of Christ? Is the “calling” to be a pastor of any greater significance to a “calling” to be a doctor or a teacher or a nurse or a policeman or a mother? Would the Apostle Paul contend that all “callings” are of equal validity?

We live in an age where people have multiple careers within the space of a lifetime. In some cases they completely retrain for a new career. This is true of most pastors who held a former career before their sense of “call” to pastoral ministry. Having received training and equipping for pastoral ministry do we believe the act of ordination sets a pastor apart from then on (i.e. for the rest of his/her life) in an irrevocable state? If a pastor chooses to discontinue in pastoral ministry (for whatever reason) have they broken a life-long commitment, thereafter deemed to have failed? Or could it be that we can celebrate the episode of their ministry and recognise its closure with honour, rather than veiled shame?

Some former Baptist pastors prefer to retain their ordination title as “Reverend” even though they no longer exercise a pastoral function. What does such practice imply? Does it reduce ordination to something of a qualification – perhaps similar to a degree? Or would we be better to delimit the use of such titles and credentials to those who are actually in ministry appointments, and only for as long as they do so?

A local church question: Is ordination a local church function or a denominational ordinance?

To what extent is the Baptist movement a loose collection of antonymous local churches, and to what extent are we a regional/territorial/ideological denomination? A range of views exists and this paper does not suggest one answer. Some have argued that principles of denominationalism do not easily fit a Baptist ecclesiology. Others contend for principles of association and covenantal relationships that enable local churches to do certain things “better together” than can be achieved on their own. However, it behoves Baptist Unions and Conventions to think through where the place of ordination or credentialing best fits. If the answer is at the wider denominational level this would imply a set of common or core

competencies that are measurable and acceptable, so as to allow a recognised pastor to move ministry location within the movement. Others argue that Baptist ecclesiology focuses more squarely upon the local church as the arbiter of ministerial competence and recognition, and that the right of the local church to call whomever it wills to be its pastor is sacrosanct.

A missiological question: Does the model of ordination and distinction between clergy and laity tend towards a passive missiology?

Given the primary purpose of the Christian church is the continuation of the mission of Jesus^{viii} missional ecclesiology must ask questions about models of church organisation that best achieve the desired result. Are models of church that perpetuate priestly elitism (i.e. whether formally or implicitly or even unintentionally) most efficient missiologically?

The language and practice of ordination tends toward recognition of only certain people in the rhythms of church life who are competent to perform certain tasks. The sacraments cannot be celebrated unless an ordained minister is present to officiate. But the same can also be said of churches that claim a low(er) view of clergy. A model of church ministry that recognises a pastor as the principal servant of the church in dispensing biblical teaching, counselling, administration and pastoral care is equally questionable.

This paper does not call into question the validity of local church pastoral ministry. This is not a veiled call for Bretheranism. The New Testament offers examples of local church servants employed, supported and honoured for such work. But what is to be the focus of those appointed to such positions? The language of ordination tends to set people apart from the rest, and to afford status in the church that is crucial or central to its function. It allows for a much higher form of passive involvement in church life than the New Testament prescribes. Ordained clergy are supposedly more learned and competent in handling the Scriptures and dispensing wisdom and in caring for the infirm. Yet how does this compare with the concept of “body ministry” that the Apostle Paul wrote so clearly about? Moreover, when Paul wrote to the Ephesian (4:11-12) church he implied the purpose of those gifted as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers was less on delivery of

professional service, and more upon equipping fellow members of the church in the delivery of such ministry.

A postmodern question: To what extent is organised religion and the institutional models of church being deconstructed by the generations that follow?

Philosophers differ on their definitions of post-modernity, when it started or when it will end. Some have already begun to describe the term as *par se*. Suffice it to say that in the twenty-first century many former institutions and foundations of thinking or values have begun to crumble. Language and wisdom from the modern age is deconstructed and truth has been transformed into relative ideology – you have yours and I have mine, and all are valid.

The shape and function of the church does not escape the ravages of post-modern critique. Some might even say it deserves more particular focus than other institutions in society. The point is, everything is now being questioned, and asked to give fresh reason for being. Historical church practices like ordination are no exception. Younger members of the church are less likely to blindly accept tradition as valid reason for keeping practices going. Inherent respect for honorific roles and offices are less assumed than they once were. Churches built around systems of hierarchy may not fare as well in the years ahead than those that are more hierarchically flat or inclusive. That means the Baptists have a great opportunity within a post-modern world. Theoretically at least, we recognise the priesthood of all believers and do not defer to overlords as the soul arbiters of revelation and biblical exegesis. We say that every Christian is competent to hear the will of God or to at least participate in the process of its discernment.

All this raises questions as to where the language and practice of ordination fits in contemporary and future Baptist ecclesiology? Have we unwittingly imbibed models from other denominations, from whom we once dissented? Given the context in which we live is it time for us to think radically again about the nature of the church and its ministry, and what best connects with a generation who hold deep suspicion concerning traditions from the past?

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ⁱ Leon Morris, *Ministers of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1964), 12.

ⁱⁱ Acts 2:16-21; Joel 2:28-32

ⁱⁱⁱ Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A biblical-historical view*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) p.79

^{iv} Laurie Guy, *Baptist Church – MB726* (Lecture Notes), (Carey Baptist College, NZ, 2005), Week Three, p.6

^v Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, (Philadelphia, PA: Judson Press, 1959) p.65

^{vi} William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 120.

^{vii} A. Gilmore, *The Pattern of the Church – A Baptist View*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 47.

^{viii} Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-47; John 20:21; Acts 1:8