

## The History and Meaning of Ordination in the Pre-Reformation Church

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### *Introduction*

From the very beginning of the church, there has been an *ordo*, or structure, based on a succession of leadership. After the earthly ministry of Jesus, most of the original twelve disciples became the first generation of leaders in the church. They, along with Paul, were itinerant evangelists who selected others to be local pastors under their authority (I Corinthians 4:17, I Thessalonians 3:2). This selection process not only allowed for the succession of the next generation of church leaders, it also served to legitimate the authority of the new leaders in the eyes of the Christian population. Thus it is the beginning of the rite of ordination.

As we examine the development of ordination in the church, three important aspects of authority emerge. These three aspects are: the teaching office (defining and enforcing theological orthodoxy for the sake of unity); church discipline (defining the moral expectations of church membership and enforcing them through excommunication and reconciliation); and presidency (presiding over the sacraments and other rituals of the church).

The goal of this paper will be to examine the historical development of ordination in light of these three important issues of authority. I will focus on the theology of ordination, as well as the development of the hierarchy (since the history of ordination is inseparable from the development of the hierarchy) rather than on the specifics of ordination rituals. As a general overview, this paper seeks to give the reader a bird's eye view of ordination for the purpose of generating discussion, keeping in mind that we cannot assume a uniformity of practice across the church at any given time, nor can we assume that the developments described took place at a uniform pace in all the churches.

### *Ordination Begins as a Commissioning*

In the first century, the apostles chose their co-workers and successors and consecrated them for service, based on Old Testament precedents such as Joshua (Numbers 27:15-23) and David (I Samuel 16:11-13). The selection of deacons (Acts 6:3-6), commissioning of missionaries such as Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3), and appointing of house church pastors (Acts 14:23), were all practical responses to the situations at hand, while at the same time were understood as a recognition of God's choosing, which was brought to light by the discernment of spiritual gifts. Through prayer and the imposition of hands (II Timothy 1:6, cf. Numbers 8:10), the commissioning affirmed what God had already done, and even when there was an election (Acts 1:21-26), it was only meant to give God an opportunity to show which person was the divinely chosen one.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the apostolic age the church's leadership structure only acknowledged a distinction between those who knew Jesus and those who did not (Acts 1:21-22). In a practical sense, the New Testament knows no technical distinction between the terms *presbyteros* (priest/elder) and *episcopos* (bishop/overseer). Even in the Didache, the terms appear to be interchangeable.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bradshaw, Paul F. *Ordination Rites of the Ancient Churches of East and West* (New York: Pueblo, 1990), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Didache 15. The date of the Didache is a matter of debate, but it is probably more or less contemporary with the gospel of Matthew.

The apostles were invested with the authority of prophets, but because they were itinerant missionaries, they appointed resident pastors (variously called *prebyteroi* and *episcopoi*) to be the teachers and presiders in the local house churches. In many cases, the house church pastors were probably also the hosts and/or owners of the homes in which the assembly met. The deacons assisted these resident pastors in the liturgy of the Eucharist, including taking the Eucharistic elements to those who could not be present at the church meeting.<sup>3</sup>

### *Ordination Becomes a Hierarchy*

With the letter of I Clement, written in the early 90's of the first century, we begin to see a more formalized hierarchy emerge. Somewhere between the time of the apostles and the time of Clement (bishop of Rome 88 – 97 CE), cities with multiple house churches began the tradition of house church pastors meeting periodically as an informal council.<sup>4</sup> These councils naturally developed the practice of choosing one of their own to speak for the council in correspondence with the Christians in other cities. This person functioned as the chair of the council, but at first the chair of the council was only a spokesperson, authorized to do and say what the council advised. Eventually, a shift took place in which the council no longer told the chair what to do, but the chair told the council what to do.<sup>5</sup> This chair then became an “overseer,” not of a house church, but of the leaders of the house churches, with authority over the other pastors. At some point, the term *episcopus* began to be used exclusively for the chair of the council, and the distinction between “bishop” and “priest” was born.

Once there was a distinction of office between bishop and priest, a separate rite of consecration emerged for the bishop, however this was not considered another or different ordination, only a consecration to a more specific office of the priesthood. A bishop continues to be a priest, like the other priests.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that at the same time the distinction between bishop and priest was coming to be understood as a distinction of authority, but not a different ordination, a similar understanding was evolving in the arena of Trinitarian theology. The distinction between persons of the Trinity would come to be understood as a distinction of authority, but not an ontological distinction.

Almost immediately, certain bishops also claimed authority over other bishops, as can already be seen in I Clement. Clement of Rome expected that his letter would be received by the church in Corinth as coming from an authority.<sup>7</sup> Here we have, not simply the authority of bishops over priests, but the authority of one bishop over another, based on a pedigree of succession that goes back from any bishop through his predecessors, all the way to the apostles and Jesus himself. Since Rome claimed that its succession went back to Peter, its bishop claimed the authority to oversee other bishops. Apostolic Succession was meant to safeguard the teaching office of the church, and thereby guarantee unity, since it was assumed that theological diversity would lead to division.

By the turn of the second century, with all of the apostles gone, the bishops took the place of the apostles, and while not itinerant, the bishops took on the authority of overseer of the pastors in a

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *I Apology* 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians* 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* 3.1.

<sup>6</sup> Jerome, *Letter* 146.1.1-6.

<sup>7</sup> Clement of Rome, *I Clement* 1, 42, 44, 63.2.

given area. The priests became the resident pastors and teachers, but the bishops retained the authority over the content of the teaching. The bishops also retained the right to preside over the “mysteries,” or *sacraments*, specifically baptism and the Eucharist.<sup>8</sup> The deacons functioned as the assistants of the bishops in the liturgy.

The office of deacon was not originally a temporary step toward priesthood. It was an order of its own until some later time when the church grew to the point where the bishops could not serve the entire Christian population in a given area, and priests gained the (derived) authority to preside over the Eucharist. At that point, the deacons became the assistants of the priests, and the diaconate eventually became a rung on the ladder to priesthood, and the episcopate. However, it seems there was no requirement that a person go through the “ranks” of the hierarchy to reach the episcopacy. There are cases of prominent men being elevated to bishop without having first become priests. Of course, their consecrations were considered to be an ordination to the priesthood as well as an elevation to the episcopacy.

The power to ordain was soon reserved for the bishops. Since the authority of presiding over the sacraments was by now seen as coming from the bishops, it should not surprise us that the authority of deciding who would preside also came to be invested in the bishops. The ordination conferred on a person the right to preside over the rituals of the church, as long as it was done under the authority of the bishop. It also made one a teacher of the church, but the authority over the content of the teaching remained with the bishops. And while the power of absolution would eventually be given to priests, the authority to excommunicate and grant reconciliation was always in the hands of the bishop.<sup>9</sup>

Ignatius of Antioch, writing about 110 CE, argued passionately that no meeting of Christians should be held without the sanction of the local bishop.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the fact that he felt the need to prohibit such meetings meant that they were happening, probably in the context of early Docetic/Gnostic subgroups within the church. Ignatius’ protestations that there should also be only one bishop in each city imply that not everyone was on board with his program, and that there were in fact cities with more than one bishop.<sup>11</sup> But for Ignatius, the unity of the church required a centralized authority, and so one must obey the bishop as if one were obeying the Lord himself, and to oppose the bishop was the very definition of schism.<sup>12</sup>

### *Ordination becomes a Vocation*

It was probably not until the late second century that church leadership became a day job. Even then, there was often no stipend involved, so positions of church leadership were by default left to

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<sup>8</sup> Cooke, Bernard. *Ministry to Word and Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 562.

<sup>9</sup> Cooke, 579-580.

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* 7.1, *Letter to the Trallians* 2.2, 3.1, *Letter to the Ephesians* 5.2-3, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 2.2, 6.2, 7.2, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 8.1-2, 9.1.

<sup>11</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 4.1. The monoepiscopacy was by no means universal in the early second century, and in fact there may have been more than one bishop in some of the larger cities until the early third century. However, it is difficult to know whether the mention of multiple bishops refers to more than one bishop in a city, or to the development of metropolitan bishops, with authority over the bishops of smaller surrounding towns. Tertullian mentions “bishops of bishops,” *On Modesty* 10.12.

<sup>12</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians* 6.2, *Letter to the Ephesians* 5.3, 6.1.

those of independent means who had the free time to conduct church business. At this same time, we see the emergence of a stricter division between ordained and laity.<sup>13</sup>

By the mid-third century the churches of larger cities such as Rome had developed an elaborate list of ecclesiastical offices, including Bishop, Priest, Deacon, Subdeacon, Deaconess, Reader, Teacher, Widow, Virgin, Usher (“doorkeeper”), Acolyte, and Prophet. Later additions would include the monastic orders of Abbott/Abbess, however no matter how many of the “lower” orders the church had in any given place, only the bishops, priests and deacons were considered ordained. The others were consecrated to their office, but their consecration lacked the imposition of hands, which became directly related to an ordained person’s role in sacramental liturgy. In the consecration of the lay orders, the high point of the ritual was probably the signing of the cross on their forehead.

The orders of Prophet and Deaconess eventually died out, in part because of the controversy over Montanism, a prophetic/charismatic movement within the church that is often misunderstood as a form of heresy, but which some of the most important early theologians supported. Since the Montanists claimed charismatic inspiration apart from the hierarchy of the church, prophecy came to be considered a threat to the teaching authority of the bishops (and therefore a recipe for heresy), and so the office of Prophet was absorbed by the priests and prophecy itself was replaced by preaching. The fact that Montanists encouraged the leadership of women also made the church wary of women in leadership roles, however the real death of the Deaconess was the acceptance of infant baptism as the norm for Christian families. The primary role of the deaconesses had been to assist in the baptism of women, especially when it required the woman being baptized to be undressed. Once the baptism of adult women became rare, the deaconesses were seen as unnecessary. Any other duties associated with the office of Deaconess then were then absorbed by the widows and virgins, and eventually by the nuns.

As long as ordination has been a vocation, and probably from the time of the emerging hierarchy, ordination has been reserved for men. The stated reason was that the priest represents Christ, who is the husband of his bride, the church (and therefore as representing the Groom must be male), and that Christ himself chose twelve men. It seems clear that the historic limitation to males is also based on cultural assumptions about the *pater familias* as head and shepherd of the household. There is no doubt that there was female leadership in the New Testament church, and there is no reason to question the influence of the women whose names are associated with some of the earliest congregations in Rome, now considered title churches (Cecilia, Balbina, Prisca, Sabina, Anastasia, Susanna, Prassede & Pudenziana). However, it seems that as the hierarchy developed, the norms of a patriarchal culture (cf. I Corinthians 14:34-35, I Timothy 2:11) and the fears of Montanism and of association with non-Christian female priesthoods led the mainstream Christian church to exclude women from the vocation of ministry.<sup>14</sup> Even Tertullian, who favored the Montanist ecclesiology, made a distinction that women should be able to prophesy, but not preside over the sacraments.<sup>15</sup> Therefore even when there were female orders within the church, such as Deaconess, Widow and Abbess, they were always considered lay orders.

The Decian persecution in the mid-third century brought new challenges when those who had denied the faith to save their lives wanted reconciliation with the church. But it also brought back the concept of charismatic authority in those who had confessed the faith at the risk of their lives,

<sup>13</sup> This is evidenced by Origen’s ordination, which was called into question by some, and by the way he had been chastised by his own bishop for teaching as a lay person in the presence of other bishops.

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.13.

<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 17.5, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 9.1. Cf. *Apostolic Church Order* 26.

but lived to tell about it. These *confessors* came to be invested with authority by the grass roots of the church, in part because many of the ordained leaders had been martyred, but also because they took seriously the promise of Jesus in Mark 13:11 (par. Matthew 10:19-20, Luke 21:12-15), and treated the confessors as though they were prophets. In the *Apostolic Tradition*, which may come from around this time, it is noted that confessors do not need to be ordained, since God's choosing is obvious in them.<sup>16</sup>

What made matters even more complicated was that while those who remained with hierarchical authority wanted to excommunicate the lapsed, the confessors were offering them forgiveness and reconciliation. This pitted apostolic (ordained) authority against charismatic (lay) authority, and ultimately sparked a controversy in which the ordained clergy had to assert their authority over church discipline. The *rigorists*, those who advocated excommunication for the lapsed, argued that no one but God could forgive the sin of apostasy. Eventually, practicality and pastoral concerns triumphed over righteous indignation and it was admitted that the church could forgive the sin of apostasy, but only in the person of the bishop.<sup>17</sup>

As ordination became a vocation, it also became a lifestyle, and in the west, that lifestyle eventually required celibacy. As early as the synod of Elvira in Spain (c. 305 CE) we have a mandate of celibacy for the ordained orders. According to tradition, a similar rule was defeated at the Council of Nicaea in the east (325 CE). At a synod of Rome in 386, the bishop of Rome, Siricius, explained the requirement of celibacy as related to the celebration of the Eucharist. Since the tradition had developed of fasting for twenty-four hours before receiving the Eucharist, and this fast included abstaining from sexual intercourse, and since a priest or bishop might be called upon to preside over the sacrament daily, it was thought that priests and bishops should be on a perpetual fast from sexuality in order to properly observe the celebration of the mystery. It is interesting to note that already in the early fourth century (and therefore we can't blame it on Augustine!), there is a sense in which celibacy is a higher calling, a more pure vocation, than marriage. The "setting apart" of ordained clergy for a celibate lifestyle only served to highlight the distinction between clergy and laity.

In spite of the rulings of councils in favor of clergy celibacy, actual practice varied in the west, until the standardization under Charlemagne, and then finally the point was forced by lay investiture and hereditary sees in the tenth century and following. In the east, the practice of celibacy for priests would eventually lose out to marriage, and in the seventh century the right of deacons and priests to be married was affirmed, but only if they were already married before ordination. Bishops, however would have to be celibate, even if they were already married, probably because the celebration of the Eucharist was more closely reserved to the bishops in the east, especially on Sundays.

The development of ordination as a vocation combined with the wagon-circling challenges of the persecution led to an important shift that served to widen the gap between ordained and laity. With the third century we can perceive an evolution in the meaning of the mission of the church, from ministry understood as *Christians ministering to the world* to ministry understood as *clergy ministering to laity*.

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<sup>16</sup> *Apostolic Tradition* 9. See also Cooke, 544.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians* 8.1. Here Ignatius defines reconciliation as returning to the bishop, implying that the right of excommunication and reconciliation was associated with the bishop alone. Note that excommunication also meant that a person could not be buried with the rest of the Christian community, giving an added incentive to reconcile.

*Ordination becomes a Ritual*

While it could be argued that there has been a rite of ordination since the apostles laid hands on the newly chosen deacons in the book of Acts, ordination didn't become a true ritual until after Constantine legalized Christianity. Before the fourth century, only the *Apostolic Tradition* mentions an ordination ritual, and the sections in question are likely a later addition to the text.<sup>18</sup> Constantine gave clergy certain secular rights and privileges, and especially in the case of bishops who were invested with the authority of civil magistrates, ordination began to take on some of the pomp and drama of certain Roman ceremonies, including royal coronation. Vesting became part of the ritual in some places, as clergy began to further distinguish themselves from laity by continuing to dress in older formal (secular) dress, which ultimately took on a sacred meaning analogous to the priestly dress of ancient Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

Of course rituals also developed for the consecration of the lay orders, but what made an ordination was always the imposition of hands. This was accompanied by prayer, and assumed the conferral of the Holy Spirit on the one being ordained.<sup>20</sup> Ordination was defined by the laying on of hands, which was directly related to the authority to preside over the sacraments.<sup>21</sup>

There seems to be a shift here from ordination as a recognition of the gifts of the Spirit already in a person to the gifts for ministry coming to the person because of the ordination.<sup>22</sup> In other words, ordination has gone from recognizing someone as worthy of ministry, to *making* someone worthy. This shift can be seen in the fact that the earlier rituals began with the assembly giving their consent to the selection or election of the candidate(s). This might take the form of an announcement of the name of the person to be ordained, followed by the acclamation of "He is worthy" by the people.<sup>23</sup> Later, it might be stated in the negative as a question, which we can image sounding something like, *If anyone knows any reason why this person should not be ordained, speak now or forever hold your peace.* In this case, silence on the part of the congregation implied their consent.<sup>24</sup> Eventually this practice seems to have died out altogether as the selection of priests became the prerogative of the bishops, and the election of bishops shifted from the council of priests to fellow bishops. What remained were congregational prayers that ask for divine intervention to make the ordinand worthy and invest him with the necessary gifts for his new office.<sup>25</sup> In fact it is probably the case that the more ritualized ordination became, the more it was seen as effecting a change in the ordinand.

Finally, ritual actions such as the sign of the cross, vesting, and anointing the hands with oil might be included.<sup>26</sup> What had at one time been the recognition of an anointing by the Holy Spirit now to a certain extent became an anointing by the community, or by the newly ordained person's predecessors, conferring not only gifts, but also authority on the ordinand. The understanding of oil as a sacramental element also contributed to the perception that ordination brought about a change in the ordinand, analogous to baptism.

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<sup>18</sup> Bradshaw, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Bradshaw, 18. Cf. Exodus 28, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Bradshaw, 33; Cooke, 419, 562.

<sup>21</sup> *Apostolic Tradition* 10, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Bradshaw, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Bradshaw, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Bradshaw, 24.

<sup>25</sup> Bradshaw, 30-32.

<sup>26</sup> Bradshaw, 18, 32.

### *Ordination becomes a Sacrament*

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa spoke openly about ordination effecting a change in the person being ordained, in language reminiscent of the Eucharist, as if the ordinand himself was the sacramental element – outwardly the same, but inwardly changed.<sup>27</sup> This change had to do with the newly acquired authority to teach and preside over the sacraments, so that the person was seen as essentially different than he was before the ordination.

Post-persecution rigorism would eventually come back in the form of Donatism. The Donatists believed that having lapsed during persecution made clergy unworthy to administer the sacraments, and in fact made any sacraments administered invalid. They assumed that sin in the presider effectively cut the conduit of grace that flowed from the Holy Spirit through the priest or bishop, to the recipient of a sacrament. Since that conduit was cut, the priest or bishop was unable to grant grace or confer the power of the Holy Spirit, based on the supposition that one cannot give what one does not have. In opposition to this, Augustine taught that the conduit from God is direct to the faithful, and does not depend on the faith or purity of the presider. He wrote that ordination seals a person, just as baptism and confirmation do, and therefore the sacraments administered are effective *ex opere operato* – simply because they are done (assuming they are done correctly).<sup>28</sup> Of course Augustine would say that ordination by a schismatic bishop does not confer authority on one who is outside the succession from the apostles, but not because the ordination is invalid, only because the ordinand refuses to submit to the true church. In any case, with Augustine, the sacramental nature of ordination was confirmed.

The medieval understanding of ordination basically followed Augustine, believing that ordination was one of three rites (including baptism and confirmation) that effected a change in the person. The rituals themselves were somewhat consolidated during an attempt at standardization under Charlemagne. Then, in the twelfth century, Peter Lombard identified seven sacraments, adding ordination and extreme unction to what had been the accepted five.<sup>29</sup> The seven sacraments were made official by the Council of Florence in 1439, and confirmed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

### *Some Observations*

At the same time that ordination was developing in the church, the assumptions that underlie it and the theology of what it means were evolving along certain observable trajectories. What began as the recognition of God's choosing (via the discernment of gifts of the Spirit) eventually became the confirmation of an appointment by the highest level of the hierarchy. In other words, at the beginning, apostolic authority recognized charismatic authority, and in the end, apostolic authority creates and confers charismatic authority. Even the election of bishops went from an election by the council of priests, choosing one of their own to speak for them, to an election by other bishops, selecting a new peer from the lower rank. Thus ordination evolved from a rite of thanksgiving that *recognized* a person as worthy to lead, to a sacramental ritual that was understood as *making* a person worthy. Gifts were not merely recognized, but granted, as part of the ordination ritual.

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<sup>27</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Baptism of Christ*.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *Answers to the Letters of Petilian the Donatist* 2.30 (69), *On the Gospel of John* 5.15.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Lombard, *Sentences, Book 4*. See also Cooke, 562.

Another observable trajectory is the distinction of ordained clergy from laity. When ordination became a vocation, the separation of clergy and laity gave the impression that the ordained clergy were somehow essentially different from the laity. This difference was made manifest in the west by the requirement of celibacy for clergy, which was specifically connected to their role in the Eucharist, and then by the tradition of identifiable vestments for clergy. The eventual designation of ordination as a sacrament was the logical end result of this trajectory.

As we apply the observations of history to the present situation, especially in light of ecumenical concerns, there are several important questions to consider. I will end with these questions, with no attempt to answer them since the answers will require continued dialogue. I submit, therefore, the following questions for further discussion:

- To what extent is it legitimate to speak of a difference in the ordained person, post-ordination? If the ordained person is “set apart,” what does that mean? What does it mean for the distinction between ordained and laity?
- To what extent is a distinction between clergy and laity legitimate and necessary for sacramental presidency?
- To what extent is the education and formation that comes with a seminary degree necessary for the teaching office of the Church? In other words, how should we balance the general ministry inherent in the baptism of every Christian with the reality of the way that Scripture and Tradition are transmitted?
- To what extent is it legitimate and necessary for education to contribute to the concept of ordained clergy as “set apart,” and to the distinction between clergy and laity?
- To what extent does unity require hierarchy?