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# 1

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## What Ordination Is

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### *The Holy Spirit, the Minister's Vocation, and the Church's Mission in Creative Tension*

*“The Spirit’s blessing all ordains to show what God has done,  
yet brings to focus and contains the many in the one.”*

BRIAN WREN,

“Come, Celebrate the Call of God,” First Stanza<sup>1</sup>

What is ordination to Christians?

Ordination is a rite of the church, rooted in the ministry of the whole people of God. In ordination the ordinand receives a special calling to ministry by God’s gracious action. This definition requires and deserves some unpacking. The framers of the Faith and Order document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (BEM)* give us a start by offering language tested ecumenically, which is where all discussions of ordination in this age must begin. *BEM* links the terms *charism*, *ministry*, *ordained ministry*, and *ordination* in an interlocking set of definitions.<sup>2</sup>

- *Charism* denotes gifts given to any member of the community of faith for the upbuilding of the church and the fulfillment of its calling.
- *Ministry* in its most generous definition is “the service to which the whole people of God is called, whether as individuals, as a local

community, or as the universal Church.”<sup>3</sup> It may also refer to the institutional forms this service takes.

- *Ordained ministry* indicates “those persons who have received a charism and whom the Church appoints for service by ordination through the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands.”<sup>4</sup>
- *Ordination* refers to “an action by God and the community by which the ordained are strengthened by the Spirit for their task and are upheld by the acknowledgment and prayers of the congregation.”<sup>5</sup>

As a rite of the church, ordination affirms the call of God to the whole community of faith. The Giver of ministry, Jesus Christ, grants the gift of ministry to every disciple. In the Free church and Reformed traditions of Christianity, which are the focus of our study, this truth is brought home to us in the characteristic Protestant teaching called “the priesthood of all believers,” following 1 Peter 2:9: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Disciples of Christ, UCCs, Presbyterians, and Baptists all root their understanding and practice of ordination in the mutual ministry of the whole church. As sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther wrote, “Therefore, we are all priests, as many of us as are Christian.”<sup>6</sup> All Christians are called to ministry when we take up the cross of Jesus Christ in discipleship. More is going on in baptism than forgiveness of sin or initiation into the body of Christ, as important as each of these is. Christian baptism is also the commencement of a life saturated with God’s purpose, and because the initiative in baptism belongs to God and not to us, our initiation into the faith is simultaneously God’s choice of us as members of the community of ministry, the church. All Christians, individually and corporately, take up the mission given by God to the church and make it their own.

H. Richard Niebuhr taught us that the mission God gives to the church is the increase of the love of God and neighbor.<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr’s insights are particularly useful to a study of ordination, because he situates the church’s ministers in the context of the gift of ministry given to the entire membership of the church. The initial call to ministry, the one every member of the church shares, is the call to be a Christian. Subsequent to this fundamental call to discipleship are three incremental “calls”: (1) the “secret call,” or the inner psycho-spiritual persuasion that invites or summons a person to pursue ministry; (2) the “providential call,” or the invitation or command to take up ministry as a result of personal gifts and talents that give evidence of “the divine guidance of his [sic] life by all its circumstances”; and finally, (3) the “ecclesiastical call,” which is the invitation or summons of the community of faith or the institution of the church.<sup>8</sup> Niebuhr writes that ultimately “in one form or another, [the community of faith] has required

that [ministers] be summoned or invited or at least accepted by that part of the Church which they undertake to serve.”<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary official voices of the churches are unanimous in affirming the integral relationship between the ordained ministry and the ministry of the whole people of God.

- The Presbyterian Church (USA): “Presbyterians believe in the priesthood of all believers—that is, that all church members, regardless of their occupational choice, are engaged in ministry. That is their Christian vocation. Some among them may be called by the Holy Spirit, through the church, to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament. Thus the ministry of the Word and Sacrament is one among many occupations through which men and women express their God-given interests and abilities in life and daily work.”<sup>10</sup>
- The United Church of Christ: “The United Church of Christ recognizes that God calls the whole Church and every member to participate in and extend the ministry of Jesus Christ by witnessing to the Gospel in church and society... God calls certain of its members to various forms of ministry in and on behalf of the church for which ecclesiastical authorization is required.”<sup>11</sup>
- The American Baptist Churches USA: “One of the commonly held convictions today is that all Christians are ministers who participate in Christ’s own ministry. This is evidenced in the baptism of the individual Christian and in the doctrine of ‘the priesthood of all believers,’ where within faith communities individuals inspired by the Holy Spirit are both competent and responsible for approaching God on behalf of themselves and others... Baptists long have possessed a ‘separate’ or ‘set-apart’ ministry that has served a constituency wider than the local congregation.”<sup>12</sup>
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada: “As head of his body, the church, Christ calls upon his people to participate in his ministry and thus to make known in the life of the world the reality of God... By baptism all Christians are inducted into the corporate ministry of God’s people and by sharing in it fulfill their own callings as servants of Christ... Within the ministry of the whole people of God there is and has been from the beginning a representative ministry called of God and authorized by the church. While all Christians share in the corporate ministry, the term ‘minister’ particularly describes a person to whom the church entrusts representative responsibility. Through the centuries the Order of Ministry, in various offices, has been responsible to lead in transmitting the Christian tradition from one generation to another, translating and interpreting the Scriptures, proclaiming the gospel of Christ, administering the sacraments, serving to maintain a company of

Christians in continuity with the life and faith of the Apostles and acting as pioneers and leaders in the church's reconciling mission to the world."<sup>13</sup>

### **Creative Tensions**

Living traditions are complex oceans of meaning and symbolic action. Any serious consideration of ordination is an utter immersion into the varieties of interpretations and practices that communities of faith employ to enact ministry from age to age. The interpretations and practices that constitute ordination in the Reformed and Free church traditions are never static. Like the oceans, which contain within themselves great streams and currents running through them, virtual rivers in the sea, ecclesiastical traditions are dynamic and robust. Ideas and customs concerning the ordained clergy differ, even within the same denominational family. We will reflect on why this is so later in this chapter, but for now our consideration of these differing elements presses us to ask what we shall do with understandings that do not agree.

Arguments within these complex ordination traditions are both undeniable and unavoidable. Rather than requiring one view to prevail and another to fail, these conflicting rationales may be understood as gifts given to us out of the treasure house of the church's experience with the Holy Spirit. Opposite poles establish tensions that may be held together creatively.

The analogy of a stringed instrument is a useful one as we look for the ways and means to discern what ordination truly is in our day and time. Like the strings of a banjo anchored at the foot and the neck of the instrument, a properly construed tension between opposing ideas and customs can issue in something lovely, indeed. The tension is necessary to the nature and operation of the instrument. As the slack of the string is tightened by the key on the neck of the banjo, just so a method of holding opposite poles in ordination thought and practice can achieve a new harmony in the church's ministries. Further, the banjo analogy helps us to see the relation not only between single sets of polar opposites, but also among the several strings that make the sound of the instrument rich and whole. When one string has achieved the proper tension, it is then also put into relation with all the other sets of poles and tensions among the other strings along the neck of the banjo. Only when all the strings are in harmony with one another is the instrument said finally to be in tune. The resulting whole, then, may be said to be greater than the sum of its parts, as any lover of music can attest. And since the vagaries of time, material, and climate impinge on any instrument, requiring more or less constant attention to keep it in tune, the banjo analogy reminds us that the same kind of attention must be paid to keep our understanding of ordination current, practical, and faithful.

One might well ask if such an analogy is appropriate at all, given the diversity of world musical traditions. Since each of the denominations of the Reformed and Free church tradition have global dimensions, it would hardly do to have a chauvinistic, culture-bound musical analogy influence the definition of ordination in churches that are already too vanilla. Another uncritical, first-world assumption about truth does not help clarify a complex, global set of phenomena like ordination customs and theologies. That caution is a good one. Tonalities, scales, and judgments about what constitutes harmony and what is or is not in tune differ from place to place and from time to time. Yet as John Biersdorf, an ordained United Church of Christ minister and educator notes,<sup>14</sup> the Silk Road Project, conceived in 1999 by celebrated cellist Yo-Yo Ma, is an example of highly divergent musical traditions coming together as a testimony to diversity and interdependence. Ma founded the Silk Road Project to study the cross-cultural influences of religion, tradition, art, and philosophy on musical expressions found along the historic sea and land routes that have linked Europe and Asia for thousands of years. The project's latest recording, for example, is the product of bringing twenty-four artists together from China, Iran, Mongolia, India, Switzerland, and the United States. Ma even learned how to play the *morin khuur*, or Mongolian horsehead fiddle, in order to make the album! "It is said that when two people meet, within seconds an assessment is made on whether to trust one another," Yo-Yo Ma writes. "We all know how destructive it is when there is no trust. If there is some trust, an exchange might take place. As this trust develops over time, the exchange may lead to the best of all possibilities—creativity and learning."<sup>15</sup> In order for people to become mutually creative, the polarities and tensions of their relationships have to be identified and owned. Then the distance between them lessens, and something new begins to arise: a new, common language that overcomes boundaries without harming integrity. This is a good analogy for Christians to use as they explore the practices of their faith, because, like music, religion reaches into the heart of personal and corporate identity.

Without enslaving us to the analogy, we can still use it to illustrate a useful method to get at the meaning of ordination in the Reformed and Free church traditions that are the subject of this study. First, we shall set the poles of the argument in place out of the thought of two or more representative thinkers who have considered the issues of ordination. If specific thinkers are not found to represent the opposing views, since contrasting ideas do often arise without particular identification with a writer's thought, the opposing positions will be set in place and considered. Then, we shall consult other sources for a way to negotiate the tension between these differing concerns. In the resulting synthesis, an answer to the question of what ordination is will begin to emerge. As we set other poles in proper tension with each other, a fuller idea of ordination will manifest itself to us as we go along.

A couple of caveats are in order here. It must be borne in mind that we are not attempting to solve the difference between the polarities we examine. As Biersdorf points out, polarities always remain. They are never solved.<sup>16</sup> Next, the sets of polarities that are listed in this study are not meant to be construed as exhaustive. No doubt, others could have been chosen. These polarities are listed because of their importance to the classic debates about ordination or because of their obvious relevance to the subject at hand. Instead of being considered exclusive, they are indicative of other sets of polarities that may need to be considered in further work on the meaning of ordination in the Free and Reformed churches.

### **Tension One: Between the Many and the Few**

There is an undeniable tension between the induction of all Christians into the ministering community by baptism and the setting apart of some to the particular ministry of the church by the rite of ordination. In the history of Western Christianity, this is the opposition between the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, on the one hand, and the development of an ordained clergy or order of ministry, on the other. Thoughtful ministers and laity have struggled with this tension in a variety of ways while still affirming that the context for all true ministry is God's missional call to the whole church.

Mahan Siler, longtime pastor of the progressive Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, has serious reservations about ordination and what it does to congregational life. In letters written to Nancy Petty,<sup>17</sup> Associate Pastor for Christian Education at Pullen, Siler admits his apprehensions:

I see the practice of ordination causing serious damage. Ordination sets up a ministry class system: first class, clergy; second class, laity. For all of our intentions otherwise, a two-tiered system is created. The difference in gifts for ministry becomes unfortunately a difference in value. As Baptists, even Protestants, our *formal* theology declares—"priesthood (ministry) of all believers;" our *functional* theology declares—"priesthood (ministry) of some believers is more important than the priesthood (ministry) of others." Emphasizing the primacy of our call to ministry inherent in our baptism is theologically correct. No one would question this interpretation. Yet the greater social power goes with the ordination of clergy, not the ordination at baptism [emphases Siler's].<sup>18</sup>

There is, of course, another side to Siler's thinking about the ordination of clergy. He appreciates the way the whole nexus of ordination, including but not limited to the rite itself, situates a leader. Such a person is one "set as a part of" the community of faith in a particular way because of the

action of the community in setting leaders apart for oversight and guidance.<sup>19</sup> Still, his hesitancy about ordination practice in the church is an expression of a widely felt uneasiness running throughout Free church and Reformed Protestantism where egalitarian concerns challenge traditional ministerial prerogatives.

Ronald E. Osborn, noted Disciples church historian, stakes out a position on the other pole where the priesthood of all believers is concerned. During his distinguished career as the leading intellectual voice of the Disciples of Christ, and as an articulate spokesperson for ecumenical Protestantism, Osborn investigated ministerial and ecclesial matters deeply. In his book *Creative Disarray: Models of Ministry in a Changing America*, he decries the theological trivialization of the ordained ministry. Ministry, by which he means the effective ministry of the whole church, has been weakened and distorted by the well-meaning assertion that “every member of the Church is a minister.” While this assertion in the name of the priesthood of all believers was meant to lift up the theology of the laity, it has actually eroded the theology of the ordained clergy.<sup>20</sup> “Clergy,” meaning “given wholly to God,” is a good and noble title to Osborn. So is “professional,” meaning “asserting deeply held faith or beliefs.”<sup>21</sup> As aspersions have been cast at both terms, the concomitant losses of meaning and effectiveness to the company of the ordained have been real, and there have been no gains to offset the losses. He writes:

Granted the complete sincerity and good intentions of all those who have given currency to the statement, “Every member is a minister,” and the fervor with which preachers have urged it upon the people in this past generation, I have not observed as a result any significant increase of zeal or participation by the laity.<sup>22</sup>

It is not as simple as relegating Osborn to some high church party that is committed to the clericalization of the ministry of the church. Osborn’s credentials as a Free church ecumenist are too strong for that. He articulates the position of a considerable percentage of Reformed and Free church members who hold to high views of the ministry of the laity and the ministry of the ordained clergy at the same time, and who believe that it is unnecessary to emphasize one at the expense of the other. Both forms of ministry are gifts to the church from Jesus Christ, two sides of the same coin.

It should not be lost on us that both critiques grow out of reflection on the church’s ordination and ministerial practice. Both positions are practical theological concerns that insist on a reformation of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers from the viewpoint of the lived experiences of Christian communities. Neither baptismal ordination nor clergy ordination are dispensable in authentic Christian communities. Ironically, the practice of Protestant ordination since the sixteenth century was meant to recover

the unity of the church by healing the rift between clergy and laity. The unity of the rule of faith, “universality, antiquity, and consent,” proposed by Augustine and Vincent of Lérins, had broken down in the Western church due to schisms and clergy abuses. The doctrinal concentration of all priestly and political power in the papacy had become so extreme that ministerial reform virtually had to come. One way of interpreting the Reformation, then, is as a ministerial reform movement.<sup>23</sup> Times have changed, and competing interpretations of the priesthood of all believers have been enacted and institutionalized in the intervening years. Yet both convictions—that ministry is corporate and inclusive of all the people of God, and that the ordination of clergy is both desirable and necessary to the purposes of God—are still stubbornly present in whatever configuration of ordination doctrine and practice there may be in the Reformed and Free church traditions.

Presbyterians have sought to hold both poles together by ordaining ministers of Word and Sacrament, lay elders or presbyters, and lay deacons as a quintessential expression of the Reformed tradition. In their study of the ordination questions, Howard L. Rice and Calvin Chinn write:

We of the Reformed tradition are unique in that we ordain people to church office who, in other denominations, are called lay people. The usual distinction between clergy and laity does not apply to us. *All* [emphasis theirs] church members share in the ministry of the church...What is more, the ordination of elders and deacons is essentially the same as that for ministers of the Word and Sacrament.<sup>24</sup>

As Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., notes, “Parity between these two groups of elders [ministers of Word and Sacrament, and lay elders] is carefully maintained to insure that the church is neither governed clerically nor radically altered by upsurges of lay pressure.”<sup>25</sup> The result for Presbyterians has been a connectional polity and a highly recognizable church identity in which clergy and lay elders act and lead together without surrendering either their unity or their diversity.

The “authorizing” language of the United Church of Christ seeks to institute something of the same creativity between the poles of congregational freedom and the desire for a clear denominational identity. The church, through cooperation among congregations in associations, authorizes ordination of clergy as well as licensing and commissioning ministerial leadership. Long observes that the tension between equality concerns and the desire for a learned ministry has been with the United Church since its inception, “and it is dealt with creatively and with goodwill in an ethos characterized equally by freedom and covenanted mutuality.”<sup>26</sup>

British Baptists have come up with ways to negotiate the tensions between deeply held convictions concerning ordination and the priesthood

of all believers. Nigel G. Wright, Vice-President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, proposes a way of holding opposites in tension with each other that allows new consensus and understanding to emerge. He names his proposal “Inclusive Representation,” reminiscent of certain Disciples’ proposals,<sup>27</sup> and argues:

The ministry of all will not be realized in all its fullness without our recognition of the gifts that Christ has given some, gifts which are in reality people being and doing particular things for the sake of the whole. There is a beneficial spiral of mutual interaction here.<sup>28</sup>

Speaking particularly of the priesthood of all believers, he demonstrates how a reconciliation of understanding can take place when strong convictions are brought into dialogue with each other in the actual practice of the church, and a viable contemporary view of ministry emerges from it:

The priesthood of all by no means excludes the calling of some to particular office and to leadership since this is the way that those who are so called might make their particular contribution to the well-being of all in the shared priesthood of all believers.<sup>29</sup>

As previously discussed, both poles of the argument concerning ordination and the priesthood or ministry of all believers have merit. Both are indispensable and contribute to a deepening of our understanding. Holding both poles in creative tension allows us to conceive of the ordination of clergy in ways that need not diminish the ministry of the laity. Because ordination of clergy is centered in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, poured out upon “all flesh” (Acts 2:17), it can only legitimately be understood in the primordial call of God to all people, first to life itself, then to work, to discipline, and to vocation. As *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* teaches, charisms or gifts of ministry are granted throughout the membership of the church for the good of the world. Ministry is the work of the whole people of God and is the calling of the church. The whole body of Christ in the world receives the gift of ministry from the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit likewise fills the church with persons of every description who are gifted to edify the community and further the mission of the church.

The vocation to ordained ministry may be understood as a vocation among other vocations in the church, yet it is also the appointment to service by the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the laying on of hands to a special calling. The setting apart of some to ordained ministry is both the fruit of ministerial gifts given to the whole church and at the same time the seed of a particular calling to represent the servant community of Christ. The vocation to ordained ministry faces in two directions. Ordained ministers represent to the whole church the ministry it has been given by

Jesus Christ and hold up to the whole church the responsibility all members bear for the gifts and graces they have received individually and corporately.<sup>30</sup> Ordained ministers also serve to represent the church to the wider world in a unique way, not because of the professional time commitment or the compensation involved, but as a distinctive focus and presentation of the claims of God on all the human family. The laity of the church, themselves equipped, guided, and nurtured by the ordained clergy, act as instruments of the Holy Spirit, electing and ordaining those among them to be clergy, those who bear representative responsibility. Thus, in consent, commitment, faith, and devotion, the laity of the church stand in solidarity with clergy in proclamation and service to the world.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers means the shared ministry of the whole church, lay and clergy, and in that sense is truly inclusive of all the charisms given by the Holy Spirit, who gives vitality and vigor to the body of Christ. It does not mean the “priesthood of every believer,” however. In our current cultural context, such an individualistic interpretation of the doctrine hardly safeguards the dignity and efficacy of non-ordained ministries. Instead, an overemphasis on the entitlement of each person to the whole gamut of ministerial acts is an expression of hyperindividualism that undermines the treasured doctrine that the church is Christ’s body, all of us being members of that body with gifts to share (rather than prerogatives to assert). The apostle Paul’s vision of the church as the ministering community is not an aggregation of people with like-minded beliefs or even similar behavioral characteristics. The church in Paul’s estimation is much more closely and intimately linked than any social grouping. As limbs and organs have their own functions while being organically united for the common good in one body, just so members of the church are united in the body of Christ (see Romans 12:4–8; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 and 12:12–26). The Holy Spirit fills the community, energizes it, and expresses its vitality in varieties of charisms or gifts, given for the benefit of all. The Spirit-filled community is bound in discipleship to the same Christ. The unity of the church, then, is God-given, Christ-centered, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the ministry of the church, which is given as a gift to the whole community, though differentiated into varieties of service and offices from the beginning (see 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 27–31), is theologically one. As John Macquarrie says, “There is distinction without separation within the indivisible body of Christ.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Tension Two: Between Functional and Sacramental Models of Ministry**

We have already suggested that having deeply held convictions about what ordination is in tension with one another allows creative new understandings to emerge. Convictions rooted in church practices give us

the poles to work with. A dialogue/negotiation method of reflecting on these poles gives us a fruitful way to come to conclusions about what Christian ordination means for us today. There has been a long conversation in the history of the church about whether the nature of ordination is functional or sacramental. Whom the minister represents is the issue. Reformed and Free churches understand that the whole body of the faithful represents Christ. Ministry, then, has a sort of mimetic character. The ordained ministers represent the ministry of the whole people of God back to themselves, and they help hold church members accountable for the gift of ministry they have all been given. The Disciples of Christ are a good case in point here. The Disciples' Commission on Theology of the Council of Christian Unity notes that the ordained have a particular ministry not "different in kind, but distinctive in focus in equipping, nurturing, guiding, and setting before the church the ministry shared by all."<sup>32</sup> Ordination, then, is "set apart" only in the sense that one is called from among the whole people for appointment to:

- Leadership in obedience to the commands of God;
- Proclamation of the gospel, construed as teaching and preaching;
- Carrying out the sacramental acts of baptism and the Lord's supper;
- Deeds of mission and service; and
- Oversight responsibility for the life of the community.<sup>33</sup>

As Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., observes about the Disciples, "Ordination is for functional leadership and does not carry sacerdotal powers."<sup>34</sup> Baptists have come to similar conclusions about the nature of ordination. The church "delegates to a qualified person...a wide range of ministerial functions and responsibilities."<sup>35</sup>

United Church of Christ and Presbyterian theologians, characteristic of their Reformed understandings of ministry, subscribe to a representational model as well, but reserve administration of the sacraments to the ordained clergy.<sup>36</sup> Members of the United Church of Christ recognize that there are two schools of thought at work among them that pertain to ordination. Barbara Brown Zikmund notes that these are the "embodiment rationale" and the "empowerment rationale."<sup>37</sup> The embodiment principle recognizes the charisms of special people who embody the gospel and manifest in themselves the power of the Holy Spirit. "Confronted with the wonder of such gifted people...the church ordains to harness that charismatic power for its common life."<sup>38</sup> The empowerment principle "views ordination in relationship to function and need, not in response to the gifts of the person. The church ordains in response to the needs of the people, not in response to the talents of the individual."<sup>39</sup> She argues for holding both these ideas on authorization for ministry together. In a similar way, the Presbyterian Church (USA) ordains officers, both clergy and lay, for the good order of the church.<sup>40</sup> Ministers of Word and Sacrament, or "teaching elders," and

elected lay leaders, or “ruling elders,” share the responsibility for the governance of the church. Something special about the Presbyterian ethos is revealed by the clergy members of presbytery at the ordination of a minister of Word and Sacrament that hints of a more sacramental or sacerdotal impulse at work among them. Oftentimes, the clergy present will robe and process as a body, giving evidence that they as a group exercise the authority of a bishop in the ordination rite.<sup>41</sup> Together, they embody the power to carry and pass on the apostolic tradition.

It is helpful to bring differing thinkers from the Reformed and Free church traditions into dialogue on the matter of ordination as function or sacrament. The first of these is a Disciple, Jerry L. Sumney. Sumney takes a firm position that ordination is to ministerial functions. He understands ministry as “faithful leadership,”<sup>42</sup> which is defined by examining types of good ministry in biblical texts, by noting how Christians either approved of or rejected forms of leadership in the Greco-Roman world, and finally by bringing these findings to bear on contemporary understandings of ordination. His reading of the New Testament material brings him to conclude that the apostle Paul and Jesus Christ take up leadership in ways that contradicted the ladder of honor (*cursus honorum* and *ordo clarissimus*) that characterized the notions of upward mobility in the Greco-Roman world. Ministry, then, is about “reflecting the life and death of Jesus in one’s own life. In this the recognized leaders [of the Christian community] are not different from all in the church, all are to reflect Christ in this way.”<sup>43</sup> Sumney takes the claim that a change had come in the leadership models of the church of the pastoral epistles with a grain of salt, calling any notion that something special was imparted to these ministers “overdrawn.” In 1 Timothy 2:11–12; 5:17; and 6:1–2, he sees no list of prerogatives and duties, but rather descriptions of personal character.<sup>44</sup> As to the list of “recognized positions” found in Ephesians 4:11, Sumney argues:

The point I want to make is that there was an early and constant recognition that various people within the church possessed gifts to be used for ministry. For Paul, this is part of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a part of the body of Christ. So possessing the gifts of leadership did not entitle one to impose his or her will and decisions on the church. There is no sufficient reason to think this had changed when the writer of Ephesians gave his list of church leaders.<sup>45</sup>

In the New Testament, Sumney sees no warrant for any difference in the status or commitment required of recognized congregational leaders and any other congregant because “all Christians are ministers, all are to be involved in the work of ministry.”<sup>46</sup> This insight becomes crucial for Sumney’s functional point of view. The only distinction that he allows between clergy and laity is the personal authority conferred on those who

have a certain set of leadership skills they exercise with appropriate humility and piety in congregational life:

The distinction between pastors and others is not the difference between those who are servants of the Lord and those who are not...The authority of leaders comes from the exercise of their gifts within the community...Here [in 1 Cor. 16:15–18] we have authority which comes for life lived together, a genuine authority of presence which cannot be conferred by office. This is the sort of authority the biblical writers recognize most often as what is legitimate for Christian leaders.<sup>47</sup>

Two strands are of note in Sumney's thought on ordination, then. First, ordination stands under the authority of the biblical witness. His is a true *prima scriptura* position. Biblical texts offer models of faithful leadership that are normative for the sort of leaders the church recognizes and ordains. Scriptural models help the church resist the temptation to embrace the current CEO model of leadership so popular in our culture.<sup>48</sup> Second, ordination is about recognizing personal gifts of leadership. It is not about conferring authority, since that cannot be done by giving an office to someone. Clergy are leaders among leaders, and the pastors are recognized as having skills and learning that enable them to equip their members to "imitate Christ in a life of service to others."<sup>49</sup> Ordination, then, is a sort of *ex post facto* institutional endorsement of those who are more adept at leadership and training than others.

Sharon Warner, also a Disciples of Christ scholar, notes, "Deep in the Disciples ethos lies the resistance to the institutionalization of leadership when leadership is defined by office, status, privilege, and authoritarian domination."<sup>50</sup> Like Sumney, she holds to a thorough-going notion of ordination to function only. She is at pains to distance herself from "creeping clericalism," which to her mind denigrates the priesthood of all believers and elevates the ordained ministry to a sacerdotal class.<sup>51</sup> Since there is nothing essential about an ordained minister presiding at the eucharist in her tradition, a custom anchored in the way Disciples have read the New Testament, there is nothing sacramental about ordination.<sup>52</sup> Functionally, the ordained minister is sacramentally parenthetical in the life of the church. She or he equips, leads and oversees the congregation as a particularly prepared teaching, preaching elder who is representative of the church but never of Christ. In the name of the Campbellite wing of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ),<sup>53</sup> Warner declares, "Through the non-sacramentality (one might go so far as to say, anti-sacramentality) of ordination Disciples maintain the qualitative continuity between ordained and non-ordained."<sup>54</sup>

Yet she herself has to admit that the school of thought associated with Barton Warren Stone, one of the two major founders of the Disciples

movement, held that a higher view of the ordained ministry was permissible and even desirable for Christians who take the New Testament seriously.<sup>55</sup> This view has proven to be more open to a broad, sacramental understanding of ministry and its functions, and it has made bridge-building possible between Disciples of Christ and other denominations in the ecumenical movement when it comes to the question of ordination. One might even say that within Disciples tradition itself there is a sort of mini polar tension between the more restorationist and the more progressivist camps of biblical interpretation as regards the nature and meaning of ordination. Emphasis on one of these poles to the exclusion of the other in Disciples' thought and practice is idiosyncratic at best.

An examination of Ronald Osborn's position on the matter of function, sacrament, and ordination could well have served as the opposing viewpoint to that of Sumney and Warner. That choice would at least have shown that members of the same denomination can take divergent views on the same matter, and it needs to be noted that intra-denominational polarities exist on every issue we will consider. Still, the choice of a thinker who is not part of the same denomination is the better choice. The richness of conversation across denominational lines enhances an appreciation of the breadth of the debate on the nature and meaning of ordination among the Reformed and Free churches.

Therefore, we turn to the thought of John H. Thomas, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ. The United Church of Christ is undergoing a churchwide rethinking of the meaning and future of ordained and licensed ministries. His address "Something More: Authorized to Represent"<sup>56</sup> presents a carefully reasoned argument that ordination is more than a set of functions in the church. To the question, "Is ministry essentially a set of functions?" Thomas answers:

Ordination must mean more than the recognition of the training to perform certain functions...And ordination must mean something other than the privilege to impose an authoritarian will over the community, for such an authority merely replaces the distortion of the community with the distortion of the individual.<sup>57</sup>

Thomas realizes that the current position of his denomination is that "ordination is primarily about function."<sup>58</sup> He says, "Our tradition has been profoundly suspicious of any theology of ordination which might suggest a distinction of status or a distinction of essence."<sup>59</sup> This suspicion has come about because of the heritage of the sixteenth-century doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and because of an unwillingness to grant that ordination has any sacramental dimension. American notions of equality and pragmatism also play a role in putting the brakes on all interpretations of ordination that go beyond function. This is all reflected in the liturgy of the United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* that presents the rite as solely a matter of function.

Having acknowledged the current situation in the United Church of Christ, Thomas then argues that in practice ordination is about conferring authority on persons to serve as representatives with and on behalf of the whole church. Ministry is a gift that belongs to the church, not to the individual, and it is the church's to confer or loan to the individuals who exercise it.<sup>60</sup> Ordained ministers are to help the church represent the kingdom or reign of God. The authority to guide the community as it seeks to represent the vision of God's reign is "rooted in the authority of Christ and in the manner in which Christ exercised authority."<sup>61</sup> Since there is a christological source for this leadership in the church, those who exercise it are servants worthy of dignity. Representational ministry is restrained from abusing power and at the same time held in honor:

If we understand the "something more" of ordination to be the authority to represent the ministry of the whole people of God, not as a distinction in essence or merely in function, then we avoid the errors of exercising ministry either as "autocrats" or as "impersonal functionaries"<sup>62</sup> [who perform] certain functions that are part of the pastor's job description.<sup>63</sup>

The further step Thomas takes is to describe as sacramental the authority to represent the ministry of the whole church in its quest to proclaim the reign of God in word and deed:

In the end, that "something more" ...is sacramental. We need not bestow the formal status of sacrament in the strict sense on ordination in order to understand that the ministry is sacramental insofar as it conveys and mediates the Gospel of God's promised realm. What is bestowed, therefore, is not status, rank, or privilege. Nor is it merely the right to perform functions. What is bestowed is the authority to represent with the whole church, even as the sacraments represent the real presence of Christ and of the Kingdom in our midst.<sup>64</sup>

Peter Taylor Forsyth was one of the great figures in English Congregationalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Thomas uses him as an ancestor of the United Church of Christ who pioneered this sense of ministry as sacramental. While making allowance for Forsyth's sexist language and odd-sounding pulpit rhetoric, he quotes liberally from his forbear in order to anchor his argument securely in the tradition of Congregationalist Protestantism:

The minister is much more than a leading brother as the Church itself is more than a fraternity. He is neither the mouthpiece of the Church, nor its chairman, nor its secretary...The ministry is a prophetic and sacramental office; it is not a secretarial, it is not

merely presidential. It is the outward and visible agent of the inward gospel of Grace... It is the trustee of the one sacrament of the Word, the Word of the New Creation. An effective ministry is creative—nothing less; and a creative ministry is sacramental. The Church needs men more than rites, movements, or money; but for her ministry it is sacramental men more than brilliant that she needs.<sup>65</sup>

The contrast of Sumney's scriptural take on ordination as function and Thomas's, that ordination is sacramental in a broad sense, is instructive. Negotiating the differences between them lifts up two helpful considerations. First, scripture is normative in any discussion of what ordination means to Christians. As Stephen R. Holmes suggests in *The Practice of Theology*, scripture is one source among others in the formation of Christian understanding, to be sure. But scripture stands out from all the other sources to claim first place.<sup>66</sup> Scripture must inform the meaning of the ordination of Christians—end of story. How that information comes and what interpretation it takes, however, is a matter of debate and discussion. David L. Balch, who holds ordained ministerial standing among the Disciples of Christ, agrees with Sumney that biblical witness is primary in the discernment of what ordination should be in the twenty-first century. The early witness of the church was to a variety of ways ministers were designated. He writes: "Neither Jesus, Paul, nor the author of the gospel of John were ordained by predecessors in office. Ministers were not ordained by their predecessors but called directly by God and sometimes, not always, by a local congregation."<sup>67</sup>

Balch reads the tradition in terms of ordination to function, as well: "Paul, Luther, and Alexander Campbell emphasized the function of ministry rather than its form. All would agree that God calls individuals and gives gifts (*charismata*) that enable those called to perform their tasks."<sup>68</sup> But Balch argues that the context of Christians in the world at any given time and place should direct how ministers are designated. Conflict with Gnostics brought about a system of ministerial succession in the third century, and something similar may be needed now. Not only have different traditions constructed varieties of understandings and customs of ordination using the same New Testament material;<sup>69</sup> the same simple, straightforward texts that describe the practice of appointment, laying on of hands, and prayer to the Holy Spirit have given rise to differing constructions in the same tradition. Appeal to the Bible without thorough education is a dangerous thing. Balch trenchantly observes, "Given the ease with which the very words of the gospel can be turned into their opposite, educated pastors trained and ordained by the church, not only by seminaries, is imperative."<sup>70</sup> If scripture is the primary resource for the organization and design of a system of ministerial designation, then good education, awareness of the cultural and political milieu of the church in the world, ecumenical

implications, and the test of practice in the field must all play their part for texts to address twenty-first century needs.

Thomas opens tradition up and asks that we give fresh consideration to the sacramental character of ordination. As a response to the needs of the church in the present, he challenges the usual way ordination has been conceived throughout the Reformed and Free traditions. Of the four denominations that are the subject of this study, none could be better in which to raise a challenge like this. The United Church of Christ is a union between Reformed and Free wings, the Evangelical and Reformed churches, and the Congregational Christian churches. If such a challenge “flies” in the United Church of Christ, it is likely to achieve a hearing in other ecumenically committed churches.<sup>71</sup> By lifting up the thought of P. T. Forsyth, he anticipates questions from within his own denomination and demonstrates that a more catholic view of ministry holds a time-honored place in the tradition of movements once thought to be non-sacramental. Tradition, as we have noted, is a vast, complex ocean of symbolic meanings and acts. Important minority elements of a tradition are resources that can be recast and deployed to meet the needs of the church as it seeks to carry out Christ’s mission in the present. Intriguingly, Thomas puts the term *sacrament* in the broad sense back on the table and situates it in the context of a functionally defined ministry that has not emphasized its own sacramental function.

### ***Reconsidering Sacramental Language***

While there are varying degrees of comfort among Reformed and Free traditions about using sacramental language in reference to baptism and the Lord’s supper, all show reservations about using it to describe and theologize about ordination.<sup>72</sup> The history of tension with Roman Catholicism is clear enough to see here.

Yet ecumenical dialogue has situated any current consideration of ordination in the context of the search for a common understanding of baptism and the eucharist. Mutual recognition of ministries among the churches of the world depends on the success of this endeavor, and the sacramental position of others has caused Free church and Reformed Christians to listen to their ideas on ordination with care and appreciation.

Some churches understand “to represent” to refer to the presiding officer at the eucharist, or Lord’s supper. The president acts *in persona Christi*, in Christ’s stead.<sup>73</sup> These churches do so on the biblical grounds of Luke 10:16 and 2 Corinthians 5:20, which they see supporting the notion that whoever hears the apostles hears Christ himself. The chief celebrant must be one of the ordained clergy since “it is the ordained minister who, in presiding at the Lord’s Supper, publicly represents the divine initiative and the koinonia with the church of all times and places.”<sup>74</sup>

Of course, there are problems here for Christians who come from the Reformed and Free traditions. First, this position smacks of “priestcraft,”

the abuses of which ushered in the protests of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Second, this same position has been used by some to deny ordination to women and other minority groups within the church.

Third, there is considerable debate concerning the meaning of “sacrament” and “sacramentality” among the churches, so that suggesting that ordination is in some sense “sacramental” is to raise more questions than such language answers. This is the matter of most discussion in response to the Ministry portion of the *BEM* document.

All these things considered, there is still much to gain from listening to the sacramental position on ordination with fresh attention. There is much in the discussion that may cause theological growth for the churches of the Reformed and Free traditions. While no exhaustive rebuttal can be given these concerns in the scope of this rather brief essay, an answer may be given to each of them, to the end that sacrament and sacramentality might remain live options in the ongoing discussion of the meaning of ordination in Reformed and Free church circles.

First, it is no longer the sixteenth century. The issues that dominated the northern European landscape nearly five hundred years ago have evolved into other concerns, and “priestcraft” is one of them. Tetzels sale of indulgences and the practice of simony<sup>75</sup> are no longer in the forefront of Protestant thinking where ministry is concerned. Both Roman Catholicism and Reformed and Free church Protestantism have moved far beyond the bad old days of priest baiting and minister bashing. While there are many unresolved issues that exist on the matter of ordination between the traditions of the West, the Roman priesthood and the Protestant mainline ministry have worked hand-in-hand in ecumenical efforts such as the Faith and Order movement and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. More often than not, especially on the grassroots level, partnerships have been forged among clergy as they and their people face the challenges of exclusivist fundamentalism, interreligious dialogue with non-Christian religions, and the erosion of Christian community by the forces of materialism and secularization. Theological borders between Roman Catholics and Protestants are more porous after Vatican II than at any time since the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. While there has admittedly been little progress on matters of mutual recognition of ministerial orders between Roman Catholics and Protestants since the 1960s, there has been considerable positive development in ecclesiology. Because ministry is tied so closely with the doctrine of the church, it is the feeling of this author that the recent retrenchments of Roman Catholic thought on church order are relatively temporary in an era of generally warming ecumenical relationships.<sup>76</sup>

As to the second concern, discrimination against the ordination of women and sexual minorities is in no sense tied to notions of sacrament or sacramentality. What seems to be primarily at issue here are notions of

social and political egalitarianism rather than whether ordination is understood functionally or sacramentally. Reformed and Free church denominations have made considerable strides in thought and practice concerning the ordination of women to ministry. While some Baptists<sup>77</sup> refuse the ordination of women to the ministry of the church, many Baptists, PC (USA) Presbyterians, and members of the United Church of Christ stand in agreement with the Disciples of Christ on this matter:

We cannot...accept any interpretation which could view the ordination of women as a “hindrance.” Rather, we see the ministry of women as a gift to the church from the Holy Spirit.<sup>78</sup>

The Presbyterians speak on the matter of the ordination of women with a sterner tone:

Those persons who cannot accept the ordination of women are unable to accept leadership in the church. It would make no sense to ordain people as leaders who are not in harmony with basic principles by which the church understands itself.<sup>79</sup>

The record is much spottier when it comes to the ordination of gay/lesbian persons. Yet there is nothing natively discriminatory about a more sacerdotal or sacramental theology of ordination. Developments in the Anglican communion concerning the ordination of women and gay/lesbian people to the priesthood are notable in this regard, giving pause to some who would argue that Reformed and Free traditions are more progressive or empowering than the capital “C” Catholic embodying traditions.<sup>80</sup>

The third concern deals directly with understandings of sacrament and sacramentalism. A review of the discussion surrounding the Ministry portion of *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* gives us a good indication of where the ecumenical issues surrounding this terminology stand. In response to the Ministry section of *BEM*,<sup>81</sup> Reformed and Free churches expressed reservations about the sacramental understanding of ordination endorsed there by Faith and Order.<sup>82</sup> While *BEM* does not directly assert that ordination is a sacrament *per se*, it does call ordination a sacramental sign in three different senses:

- Ordination is a sign of God’s initiative. It is an acknowledgment of utter reliance on God for answer to the prayers made by the church on behalf of the ordinand, that the new minister be given power in the new relationship established between the clergyperson and the congregation. It is a sign of the “new forces” created by the Holy Spirit, who acts in complete freedom<sup>83</sup> (see Jn. 3:3; Eph. 3:20).
- Ordination as a liturgical act is a “sign” by which the petitions of the church’s prayers are being granted. The invocation of the Holy Spirit (*epiklesis*) in the act of ordination recognizes that any outcome belongs

to God in freedom. Nonetheless, the church “ordains in confidence that God, being faithful to his promise in Christ, enters sacramentally into contingent, historical forms of human relationship and uses them for his purpose.”<sup>84</sup> Ordination is a signifier that the new relationship now obtaining between minister and congregation is made truly “present in, with and through the words spoken, the gestures made, and the forms employed.”<sup>85</sup>

- As an acknowledgment of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the commitment of the ordinand, and the reception of these gifts by the church, ordination is a sign of the covenant. It is the exchange in kind of the church’s gifts and its commitments with the gifts, graces, and commitments of the new minister. Just so, it is also an entry into a covenantal relationship with the company of the ordained ministry.<sup>86</sup>

Entertaining this sacramental understanding of ordination and ministry is helpful to Reformed and Free church traditions by bringing them new possibilities for encounter with God. Right off the bat, dialogue is enriched with Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christianity. *BEM* contends that differing notions of what sacraments and sacramentality are go back to the Reformation.<sup>87</sup> Clearing up what the traditions mean by these terms would go a long way toward bringing the differing positions on ordination closer together. This becomes clear by beginning with a common agreement on ordination, endorsed by all three major wings of world Christianity. As the 1990 *Report on the Process and Responses* notes:

The responses [of the churches to *BEM*] agree that ordination is not just a purely human and administrative act of the Christian community. The purpose of ordination is for God and the church to endow and appoint some of the baptized for the public ministry of word and sacrament, which is essential for the existence, life and mission of the church.<sup>88</sup>

Against the backdrop of this agreement, the differing use of terms can be better understood, and the impasse between these uses can be overcome to a large degree.

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians want ministry to be understood clearly as a sacrament. Orthodoxy uses the term *mystery* primarily in reference to the saving purposes of God in Christ, which they find in the New Testament.<sup>89</sup> Though Roman Catholics use the term *mystery* as well, they primarily employ the term *sacrament* in ways that draw from a long legal tradition, which causes their use of *sacrament* to overshadow their use of *mystery*.<sup>90</sup> The history of the development of the sacraments is complex and well documented.<sup>91</sup> Suffice it here to say that Protestants have been more conservative on the matter of sacraments than either Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians. They have used the term *sacrament* in a more narrow

sense to refer to the dominical institution of baptism and the Lord's supper. It is clear, then, to see why Reformed and Free church Christians do not want ordination to be put on a par with the two sacraments or ordinances that they recognize. Yet, as we shall see, these churches share essentially the same understandings of the ordination rite as other Christians who are more liberal in their use of sacrament to interpret the history of salvation.

This history of salvation and sacramentality depends on understanding the sacraments as being prefigured in the Old Testament. God's covenant is celebrated in "manifold signs" in the life of the people of Israel.<sup>92</sup> The New Testament and the tradition of the early church developed as a continuation of this understanding of Old Testament signs as celebrations of the covenant. Just so, the new covenant is celebrated in new signs.

A sacramental interpretation of the history of salvation, then, looks something like this, according to the continuing discussion surrounding ordination in the *BEM* report:

- God communicates effectively through the idiom of Jesus Christ, especially in the passion and resurrection.<sup>93</sup>
- The Holy Spirit is the medium of communication of the risen Christ, making God's saving power present and active. Saving action, or redemption, is God's consistent purpose, and God continues to act through people in harmony with the Christ event by using their words, signs, and actions together with elements of creation. As the authors of the 1990 *Report on the Process and Responses* write, "Thus God communicates to the faithful, and through their witness to the world, his saving promise and grace."<sup>94</sup>
- Salvation and sanctification grow out of this divine communication through the works, speech, and deeds of community of faith. Salvation comes to those who hear and receive God's gracious acts on their behalf. They experience a gain in their lives—that is, they are freed from the power of sin and undergo life transformation. Sanctification comes to the faithful as they receive the gift of God's liberation and respond (1) in celebration ("thanksgiving and praise")<sup>95</sup> and (2) are "brought into a koinonia [communion/participation/fellowship] with the Holy Trinity and each other and are sent..."<sup>96</sup>
- The good news of Jesus Christ is made present and effective by this "sacramental action" both now and in the age to come. As the 1990 *Report* contends, "Through this sacramental action, communicated through words, signs, and actions...the church is called, equipped and sent, empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit to witness to God's reconciling and recreating love in a sinful and broken world."<sup>97</sup>
- The sacraments of the church are understood and deployed according to God's purpose in Jesus Christ: "Within the divine plan of salvation, already revealed in Jesus Christ, the ecclesial actions, later called

sacraments, are each in a specific way communicating the saving presence of Christ in his church.<sup>98</sup>

Because ordination as a sacramental sign is the way the *BEM* document seeks to negotiate the differences between those who see the rite as a sacrament and those who do not, it remains for us to examine how these two terms, *sacrament* and *sign*, are used by their proponents.

There are historical disagreements here, too, between the churches of the East and the West, and among the churches of the West themselves. The East/West divide is due to differing philosophies of “sign/ *signum*.” The Western churches have disagreed among themselves concerning the relation between the signified reality, or *res*, and the mediating sign, or *signum*.<sup>99</sup> *BEM* does not hesitate to use these terms together as a way out of the sacramental/non-sacramental impasse on ordination, yet the framers of the report also hold that more work must be done on *semeion* in the New Testament and on the narrative way the prophets of Israel and Jesus carry out their prophetic actions.<sup>100</sup>

Even though Protestants from the Reformed and Free churches have reservations about the use of the term *sacramental sign* in relation to ordination, these each show evidence of broad, sacramental understandings of how God is manifest and present in the world and through the witness of the church. Of course, there are gains and losses. The gains for the Reformed and Free churches outweigh the language disputes, however. Word and sacrament are not opposed to each other. The Protestant mainline has understood for generations that this argument is made of straw. The heart of the Christian liturgical tradition shows how one works to augment and amplify the other in the formation of Christian life and witness. Sacramental understanding introduces important cosmological, ecological, and social implications to the ordination discussion going on in the Reformed and Free churches.<sup>101</sup> The tendency to spiritualize Christian faith, which is so much the temptation of Word-dominant Protestant traditions, is helpfully counterbalanced by broad, sacramental understandings that take the material world and ecological systems seriously. The search for justice and the liberation of all sorts and conditions of people are enhanced by an ordination that resists taking embodied human beings and turning them into thoughts, as certain forms of Protestant rationalism are wont to do.

To reconsider ordination in relation to a sacramental sign-function causes the traditions of the Reformed and Free churches to look with new eyes at the way the ordination rite is situated in the rest of the worship of the church. Baptists, Presbyterians, and UCCs, who may choose to ordain in the context of eucharistic worship or not, are challenged to recover the ancient practice of the church for good contemporary reasons. A ministry that begins in a sacramentally significant way needs to be commenced in

the context of the ecclesial action most closely associated with God's communion with humanity, the eucharist. Disciples of Christ who routinely ordain in the context of a service of preaching and eucharist are challenged to engage their practice in a theologically reflective way that is anything but routine. God is communicating something through the sacramental sign of ordination that must not be missed by the easy negligence of the familiar. The edifying oddness of Christian faith and practice is accentuated by juxtaposing prayer and the laying on of hands with the eucharistic meal. Christians need to stretch themselves at this point. God is seeking to communicate to church and world by such ordination, and we must open ourselves to what that is.

Most importantly, a new synthesis that infuses sacramental understandings with functions such as leadership of the congregation, preaching, teaching, administration of the sacraments, service, and oversight offers new ways to encounter God by the faithful. Embodiment does not subordinate empowerment. If the ordained person is signed sacramentally to equip the faithful, the mystery of God is enhanced every time ministries are empowered. Embodiment does not imply hierarchical or patriarchal privilege. Rather, it mandates accountability and responsibility: accountability for one's ordination to God and the people of God, and responsibility to equip the faithful for their witness in the world. To see ordained ministry as a sacramental sign is to see that particular ministry and all other ministries pointing like a sign beyond themselves to the One deserving of thanks and praise: God.

To hold function and sacrament together enriches both. As will be made clear in the discussion on the next set of differences, the gift of ministry and its official character offer a similarly enriching way to understand ordination.

### **Tension Three: Between Themes of Office and Gift**

Where one begins a consideration of ordination to ministry makes a great deal of difference. All traditions use the language of call to describe how persons are designated for ministry. According to Paul D. Hanson, this notion of calling arises as a reflection of the experience of Israel and the church having been set free and gathered as a community by the act of a gracious God:

The Yahwistic community was on its most primal and basic level "the people called"...The Greek word, used first by Luke, that came to designate the Christian church (*ekklesia*), with its root meaning of "those called forth," makes explicit the nature of the people of God as a *called* people [emphasis his].<sup>102</sup>

The more technical use of the term as a summoning to service and leadership in the community of faith is built squarely on the sense that the

church does not produce its own election. That sense of dependence on a summons external to the self has been imported from the church's own profound sense of election. Yet what it means to be called to ministry has a profound impact on what ordination means, both to the churches who ordain and to the ordinands who offer themselves in service to church and world.

*Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* reports that beginning with the Greek term *cheirotonein* or with the Latin terms *ordo* and *ordinare* sets the construction of ordination customs down two differing cultural paths:

- *Cheirotonein*, used in the secular sense of “appointment,” as in Acts 14:23 and 2 Corinthians 8:19, draws its meaning from the extension of a hand either to designate a person or cast a vote. Some authorities see it as referring to the laying on of hands, as in Acts 6:6; 8:17; 13:3; 19:6; 1 Timothy 4:14; and 2 Timothy 1:6.<sup>103</sup> Everett Ferguson notes that this term is employed by the ancient church in the laying on of hands in ordination. Early Christians understood this act, accompanied by prayer to the Holy Spirit, to be a form of blessing or benediction on the individual, a commendation of the person to the grace of God, as in the ceremonial laying on of hands with prayer that sent Barnabas and Paul out to be missionaries to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1–3).<sup>104</sup>
- *Ordo* and *ordinare* are derived from Roman judicial usage and denote a special status of one group from another, as in the case of aristocrats in distinction to plebs. So, senators, while not plebs, represent them.<sup>105</sup> According to Patrick McGoldrick, this group of words—*ordo*, *ordinare*, *ordinatio*—was first used in distinctive Christian ways by Tertullian. In his usage, the terms have a “strong institutional” and functional flavor, so that “to ordain is to designate to some function, to install in a charge, to give a mandate.”<sup>106</sup>

It was the experience of the framers of *BEM* as they dealt with tensions and differences in ordination practices that “the starting point of any conceptual construction using these terms will strongly influence what is taken for granted in both the thought and action which result.”<sup>107</sup>

The themes of office and gift show how pertinent *BEM*'s observations are. If one begins with the idea that ministry is primarily an office to which one succeeds, then the notion of differentiated ministry looks original. If, on the other hand, one starts from the presupposition that the community of faith raises up those of its number who have the gifts necessary to lead and serve it, then ministry as task looks original. Both want to appeal to a classic apostolic or post-apostolic time when patterns of ministry and designation were established. As indicated above, the same New Testament material can be marshaled to support either presupposition. Likewise, as Paul F. Bradshaw has shown, the testimony of the early period of the church's history was to a variety of ways leadership was expressed:

Rather than trying to force the New Testament and post-apostolic testimony to fit into one single mould, therefore, the evidence is better served by the presumption of the probable existence of varied patterns of leadership in different early Christian communities, and also a variety of influences bringing those patterns about.<sup>108</sup>

So, is ordination a summoning to embody an office that comes from the appointment of the apostles by Christ himself and is transferred institutionally through a ceremony of the laying on of hands with prayer? Or is ordination the empowerment of gifted persons to serve among the other minister-members of the church, the election to which is made by a ceremony of prayer and the laying on of hands? Although the rite of ordination has the same basic elements involving the same ancient liturgical practices, the meaning the rite is given is something upon which whole denominational structures of ministry are built. Barbara Brown Zikmund has helped us talk about these differences,<sup>109</sup> but we must negotiate the distance between these positions, or we will be left with irreconcilable ministries.

Generalizing about which denominations prefer office over gift, or vice versa, has its risks. Both understandings have proponents in each respective church. This being the case, however, we may go on to “sin boldly” and say that the Presbyterian view is more closely associated with ordination to office, with American Baptists aligned more toward ordination as affirmation of gifts. Disciples of Christ would fall somewhere in between the two, formally using the language of office, but still remaining emotionally attached to the practice of affirming the gifts they perceive in ordinands. The United Church of Christ is more nearly a middle axiom in this discussion, given its Congregational and Reformed roots.

Reformed and Free church Christians believe that human institutionalization and divine order are not to be confused in matters of ordination.<sup>110</sup> Presbyterians and Baptists speak with the same voice on this matter, for example. “Ordination is an act of the church,” writes Presbyterian theologian Thomas D. Parker. “[It is] not a sacrament of the Gospel; it is a matter of good order for the health and fidelity of the churches. According to John Calvin, God does not need ministers to do the work of the Spirit, but we do.”<sup>111</sup> In its *Recommended Procedures for Ordination*, the American Baptist Churches USA note, “It is the right and responsibility of the local church to ordain those whom it recognizes as being called of God. That ordination may be particular for the local church or it may be general on behalf of all churches of like faith and order.”<sup>112</sup> Their polities and customs may not agree, but for these churches on the poles of this spectrum, ordination is a theological and practical development rather than an expression of divine intent. Allegiance to a polity is important and influential

in the construction of ordination rites, but no polity or custom can legitimately claim to be revealed truth.

The distance between the themes of office and gift can be negotiated. The Baptist conversation here can point the way for how to do it. Of course, there are unique features to the Baptist approach to ordination and ministry. This exposition of some aspects of how they wrestle with these competing models of leadership that underlie meanings of ordination is meant to allow them to see new resources in their own tradition. It is also meant to offer other churches the chance to see their own practices and theology of ordination in a new light.

Along with the majority of Christians, many Baptists have discerned a “pattern of office” that is associated with the traditions of the Western church.<sup>113</sup> This pattern is in threefold form: bishop, elder or presbyter, and deacon. Evidence for this threefold ministry can be found in both the New Testament and the history of the early Christian community. This pattern underlying ministerial presuppositions is hallmarked by association with the calling of the Twelve (see Matthew 10) and is in that sense “classical,” emphasizing the “givenness” and priority of ordained ministerial leadership in the church.<sup>114</sup> Preachers are sent out into the world, and the church gathers around their proclamation of the reign of God. In this view the sphere of ministerial operation is beyond the local congregation, yet inclusive of it. One is a minister of the whole church, and therefore a local pastor. This dimension of the pattern of office means that qualifications for leadership are valid and transferable to other situations besides the one in which the original ordination occurs. Finally, there is a sense in this pattern that a substantive change occurs in those who are ordained, bordering on (and perhaps more than that!) a change in the ordinand’s character. Nigel Wright, a British Baptist, has described this as the ontological dimension of ordination.<sup>115</sup> Though this pattern is undisputable, and it became more or less dominant in the church by the second century,<sup>116</sup> it is not the only one.

Other Baptists have discerned a “pattern of dynamic gifting” at work in the early churches (see Mt. 23:8). The Holy Spirit raised up congregational leaders who possessed the graces and skills necessary to minister to the gathered community.<sup>117</sup> The inner testimony of the individual, inclining a person to believe God was calling personally to ministry, was matched by an outer call from the congregation, who perceived the gifts and graces of the individual as those needed by the church. The American Baptists say, “The belief was that Christ had endowed some with the gifts for ordained ministry, and that a congregation of Christians sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit could discern who had these gifts.”<sup>118</sup> No order or office of ministry is indispensable to the church, since any baptized believer may, with the proper authorization, carry out ministerial tasks and preside at the observance of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Formal presidency on the part of the ordained ministry is, in this view, a matter of

earned honor and local custom. For the most part, ordination is understood in functional terms, and ordination is “a ratification of God’s call of the individual to ordained ministry.”<sup>119</sup> There is no substantive difference between a minister and anyone else in the church. Ordained ministers “do bear the responsibility of their designated ministries, but are not a separate class within the church or a group with special access to God.”<sup>120</sup> The difference that is there resides in the roles the congregation (or congregations in an association) traditionally grants the minister to perform. So the reality to which the minister must answer is the authority of God communally manifested in the gathered community of faith. The congregation is theologically prior to the ministry, which arises out of it. The sphere of operation of these ordained leaders is local first and foremost. A person is a minister of the whole church as a consequence of being a local pastor, not the other way around.

In its Policy Statement<sup>121</sup> on ordained ministry, the American Baptist Churches’ position is that the variety of leadership forms in scripture have permitted Baptists to understand and organize their ordained ministry in ways that have addressed the needs of their congregations throughout the years.<sup>122</sup> That Baptists could live well in the tension between differing views of office and charism in scripture and early Christian history should not be surprising. Surely, from time to time, leadership is disputed, and interpretations of how the church designates its leaders cause friction. The nature of their life together, however, allows divergent views to exist in the same denominational family (the current Southern Baptist Convention being the notable exception). According to Principal Wright, there is a range of position on ministry that stretches all the way from a High or Presbyterian view to a Low or Anabaptist view.<sup>123</sup> That such a tradition avoids schism and remains united is a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit.

The American Baptist Churches USA, headquartered in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, exhibit features of their polity that enable negotiation of the tensions between the models of office and gift. First, they show a strong voluntaristic impulse in their common life. The covenant they live by in Christ is consented to voluntarily. This is not the consequence of American pragmatism and notions of equality. Neither is it fundamentally about the democratic rejection of hierarchies. At the core of voluntarism is trust, and in the end, only trust can make a covenant viable.

Second, Baptist life illustrates for us how individualism, interdependence, and accountability can be held together in a creative and distinctive way. Neither the individual pole nor the social, ecclesial pole is seen to be dispensable. Local autonomy and congregationalism are modified by the association, which plays an important role in regard to ordination. Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., notes that in Baptist practice,

The status of ministers is enhanced by having their ordinations performed by the association. The association sets educational

expectations; examines candidates for competency and orthodoxy; assists local congregations in the service of ordination; and even enters as a friendly interlocutor if tensions develop between a congregation and its minister.<sup>124</sup>

Third, Baptists share with other Reformed and Free church Christians the value of life together in a community in which uniformity is not mistaken for unity. One way this has been identified is “the willingness to agree to disagree.” Convictions are passionately held in tandem with a commitment to diversity of opinion and interpretation. Unity in Christian community, then, is situated in a commitment to diversity in thought and practice. If covenantal freedom is associated with voluntarism, and if covenantal obligation is associated with modified understandings of autonomy, then unity in diversity is the conceptual basis for a living or dynamic covenantal community. This also means that a pattern of negotiation is undergirded by the first principles of covenant community. There is a good deal of humility and self-awareness in any system of common religious life in which the negotiation of polarities is a customary way of doing business. As the Policy Statement on ordained ministry says, “a degree of tension, but not antithesis or antagonism” is no strange thing in Baptist history.<sup>125</sup> Each party to a difference of conviction stands humble before the truth, which no one completely grasps, much less possesses. All positions, in the final result, are tentative, subject to change, growth, and instruction, for all are accountable to God. Nigel Wright sounds a perceptive note when he reminds us that what we may at one time see as irreconcilable differences may on reflection actually be confusion. What makes an argument compelling is that the polarities we tend to project outside us really exist within us. In honest moments, most of us will admit that we can see the other side of the debate, and we even find ourselves “personally oscillating between different poles rather than firmly fixed in one or the other.”<sup>126</sup>

Voluntarism, interdependence and accountability, and a commitment to diversity set the stage for negotiating the polarities of ordination to office and ordination as ratification of giftedness. Each position makes a substantive contribution to the other. The community of gifts and graces needs the continuity, standards, depth, sense of connection, and heritage that come along with the notion of ordination to office. There is a “sent” nature to ministers who are ordained to office in the name of Jesus Christ that is not so easily co-opted by the politics and purse strings of the congregation. Because they are not a mirror image of the people they serve, they can call the community to account with a sense of leverage that inbred familiarity does not usually allow. This position also serves as a check against hyperindividualism, idiosyncrasy, and angelism in congregational leadership. On the other hand, the model of ordination to office needs the vitality, cultural understanding, personal authority, spiritual embodiment,

and congregational savvy that the communal model of ordination as dynamic gifting offers. Because of its rootedness in the life of real congregations, this pattern of leadership serves as a hedge against absolute ordinations<sup>127</sup> and the entrenchment of unresponsive hierarchies in the church. It also resists the tendency of some polities to ensconce their clergy as lone professional Christians in congregations, relieving the membership of the church from their responsibilities to live out the gospel, thus devaluing the ministries of the laity.

Giftedness does not apply to only one of these patterns underlying ordination. There is a gift quality to ordination to office. As Christ chose servant leaders to carry the message of the good news to their generation, the risen Christ blesses the church with an ordered ministry, expressed in traditional offices. These offices of ministry bring the gift of representation to the mission of the whole church and offer a living testimony to the self-sacrifice and consecration of one's whole self that Christ requires of all disciples. Conversely, the affirming model of ordaining spiritually gifted women and men whom Christ calls bestows a sense of solidarity to everyone in the church that is available in no other way. Those chosen to lead and serve share the same flesh and blood as the congregations who spawn them. Members of a congregation can see the transformation of one of their own number right before their very eyes. What a challenging gift!

Yet this very transformation from one set of expectations to another that lies at the heart of ordination is a matter we must grapple with before we can leave this set of polarities. The nagging question remains, "What does ordination do in a person's life?" Ordination conveys authority and obligation, and it betokens recognition and representative ministry. Ordination means to be inducted into ministerial office as a gifted, graced leader. There is something sacramental about it, at least in the broad sense. But beyond confirming the gifts and graces the ordinand already possesses, what, if anything, does ordination change in the person who receives the laying on of hands with prayer?

Even to mention such a question rouses all the old fears in the Reformed and Free church community: anti-clericalism, devaluation of the non-ordained, creation of a caste system, anti-Catholicism, and the like. These traditions in particular have resisted the authority of princely bishops and the semi-magical notion of externally introducing something "indelible" and "ineradicable" into the life of a person.<sup>128</sup> But can there be no other way to understand a change in someone's core values and character? Wright argues that in ordination an "ontological" change does occur in the lives of women and men in a specialized sense. Nothing indelible is imparted to them. Rather, they undergo a change in their "way of being" or in their "order of life." This is an inner change brought about by the Holy Spirit. It is a new and effective sense of responsibility and commissioning:

In that the ordained person is set aside for ministry with the prayers of God's people, those prayers must count for something, unless we believe that prayer in general counts for nothing. An enduement of the Spirit for ministry is surely our firm expectation and this must indeed mean a change. The act affirms that [the newly ordained ministers] are commissioned to represent God's people in an enduring way and with a degree of authority that is not shared by all. It should make a difference to the ordained person's sense of responsibility to live a disciplined and godly life that is particularly open to hearing and receiving the word of God for the people of God.<sup>29</sup>

Something rings true here, and it deserves a new hearing by churches of the Reformed and Free traditions. If the practice of these churches is to be taken seriously, a new consideration of something like a change in an ordained person's way of being in the world is warranted, a change that is continuous with the change wrought by grace through faith at baptism, but distinct even from that. It does not necessarily follow that this line of thought carries with it a hidden preference for clergy over the rest of the membership of the called community. This is not a devaluation of anyone else's way of being Christian. It is, however, a different one that carries with it new expectations and a reordering of life in a profound way. If the tasks of a faithful life were all that changed in ordination, then when those tasks were over, the ordained person would no longer carry with him or her the expectations and way of being that go with ordination. If a new role or set of roles was imparted to a person in ordination, then a person could lay the role down, and the ordained state would cease. But such is not the case. Roles and duties are addressed in Reformed and Free polities by the bestowal of "standing," a recognition and validation that is distinct from ordination. The removal of standing from an individual does not affect ordination, since the office does not cease even when the role is no longer exercised. When a person is ordained, it is for life.

John Macquarrie reflects helpfully on the difference call and ordination make in the lives of ministers. More is going on in the formation of ministerial character here than the assumption of a new set of roles. He writes, "The calling to ministry is an expression of election, the summons to a new relationship." It has an "ontological consequence" and shapes the life of the one called. "For no one who has known such a call can ever be quite the same again. Such a person cannot settle down as if nothing important had happened, but from now on will be attentive to God's calling and let it be the guiding principle in life."<sup>30</sup>

The calling to ordained ministry is what Macquarrie describes as "a special kind of election and continuous with the election of all the faithful." Through the church, God engenders a new, "ministerial character" that is

“a special development of the character which originates at baptism.”<sup>131</sup> He is using the term *character* in the root sense of the distinct mark made by a seal or die, as in Hebrews 1:3. This understanding of character is intertwined with community and is best described as an overriding or directing concern that profoundly fashions the heart and spirit of a person into something new.<sup>132</sup> This process of character formation takes a long time, and one might legitimately say that it is lifelong in the making. There is no linear progression implied here, because ministers sin after ordination just like other people do. But this calling to new character is tenacious, and God keeps calling the church’s ministers back to their vocation again and again, giving them the gifts they need to fulfill their vows.

Macquarrie follows Daniel Day Williams in refusing to allow that ordination is merely the assumption of a set of roles or duties. As Williams writes in *The Minister and the Care of Souls*, “Vocation is more than role; it is a life dedicated and a responsibility assumed. No one should be playing a role at the point where ultimate things are at stake.”<sup>133</sup>

No matter the theoretical assumptions and doctrinal niceties of traditions that refuse to recognize differentiated leadership in the body of Christ, the expectations placed on women and men do change. As they take up the mantle of ministry, they change, too. Whether seminarians acknowledge the change or not, it still comes in the way they are now being viewed by the members of the churches from whose ranks they have lately left. Directors of field education midwife their students through this change all the time. The same persons may have been campers or conferees just a few weeks prior to entering ministerial preparation, but as soon as they announce their intention, people begin to moderate their behavior and speech around them. The so-called “double standard” is applied to them with increasing intensity. As soon as they assume a student ministry in a church, their status before the law changes. A new set of behaviors is required because of the inevitable assignment of authority and power to them, often long before the actual rite of ordination is performed. The seminarian may not feel a change at all, but it comes just the same. Some reject the tyranny of the double standard and rebel against it. But the notion that a change in being occurs to those who respond to God’s call to prepare for the ordained ministry is so ingrained, even in the memberships of churches that teach a radical interpretation of the priesthood of all believers, that everyone in the seminary community must deal with it. Those seminarians who seem to fare the best are the ones who receive the coming change with patience, gratitude, a touch of humor, and a dose of humility. Perhaps the experience is most like pregnancy and labor. It is usually painful and a bit messy, but it is also immensely rewarding. The old is passing away, and the new is being born. Ordination is the focus of this gestation period. It is a watershed moment in the whole event of ministerial transformation. While it is a culmination, it is also a commencement.

Ordination is a sign of the change and an efficient cause of the change it presages. Office and gifts come together with prayer and the laying on of hands, and something new is done—not magical, surely, but just as surely, something ontological, as Wright, Macquarrie, and Williams have contended.

Ordination, then, in this view, is a theologically pregnant moment in a life that is constantly called to become new. It is a theological moment in which vows are made and prayers are offered, an ecclesial event in which the basic theological assumptions of ministry are clarified and renewed. It is a human moment when love, devotion, and surrender take on ceremonial life in the community of faith. It is an eschatological sign of the inbreaking of the reign of God in the power of the Spirit, as claim is laid in a distinctive way on the very being of women and men. Ordination is a pivotal moment in the ongoing formation of ministerial character, to the end that the whole church may carry out its fundamental mission of bringing God’s salvation to humankind, and we humans may be made “a holy people, may share in the life of God.”<sup>B4</sup>

#### **Tension Four: Between Models of Ambassador and Servant**

The Bible, the primary norm for our understanding of ordination, is the impetus to set up this new dyad of polarities. There is no blueprint for ministry in the New Testament. As demonstrated in the previous two sets of poles, one who is looking for a single definitive pattern of leadership in scripture will be frustrated. There are various forms of leadership in the earliest churches, as scripture and the post-apostolic sources demonstrate. So other questions must be asked of the Bible if we are to get at the sort of ministry the Holy Spirit empowers in ordination. If the characteristics of this ministry can be determined, then another major clue to what ordination means in contemporary life should become clear. One way of doing this is to seek out the core meaning of ministry or service in the New Testament witness.

All the churches we are examining in this study consider themselves “people of the Book.” A brief survey of the way the Bible informs their ordination rites drives home the significance of the scriptural witness for Free and Reformed tradition understanding of ministry.

The second question asked of any ordinand, irrespective of denomination, concerns Holy Scripture:

- The United Church of Christ asks, “Do you, with the church throughout the world, hear the word of God in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and do you accept the word of God as the rule of Christian faith and practice?”<sup>B5</sup>
- The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the U.S. and Canada have used the same question as their ecumenical partners, the United Church of Christ, in some of their ordinations. Currently, they are moving toward a more regularized ordination service. Under the

“Pastoral Guidelines” section of the Division of Homeland Ministries Web site, the Second Promise of the Candidate is prompted by this question: “Paul the apostle testified, ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.’ Will you endeavor to be diligent in your practice of the Christian life: reading the Bible, continuing steadfastly in prayer, and taking up your cross daily to follow Christ?” Scriptural formation is prominent in all of the Disciples’ questions, drawing primarily from Lukan (Acts of the Apostles) and Pauline sources to shape the examination of the ordinand.<sup>136</sup>

- Question two in a characteristic ordination service of the American Baptist Churches USA asks, “Do you promise to be faithful in prayer and in the reading of the scriptures and through study to deepen your knowledge of divine truth and human experience?”<sup>137</sup>
- The Second Constitutional Question posed by the Rite for the Ordination to the Ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA) asks, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ and the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?”<sup>138</sup>

Prior to authorization for ordination, groups charged with the nurture and certification of persons for ordination meet and question candidates. In formal examinations by regional, associational, or presbyterial committees on the ministry, candidates for ordination are examined for more than their preparation in biblical languages and their interpretation of scripture. Committees often go further, asking candidates to give two or three Bible passages they carry in their hearts that have shaped them in ministry. The innocence of such a question is beguiling. On one level, it seems that a candidate’s ability to memorize and quote a text is being tested, something that should have been accomplished in early religious education. But on another level, what is being asked is for an account of how a candidate actually understands ministry scripturally. In a subtle sense, the candidate is being questioned by scripture itself. Ordination can be understood, then, as a thorough questioning of ordinand and church by the Bible, a very Protestant thing to do!

It is inconceivable for Protestants to have a definition of church and ministry that is not informed and answerable to the canon of books called “Christian Scripture,” the Old and New Testaments. First and foremost, any theology of ministry or model of ministry must be “normed” by scripture. This is not some sort of textual archaeology, though establishing the history of the text and its redactions is of utmost importance to the interpretation and preaching of the texts in the contemporary world. When questions of identity and authority (which are always theological questions!) are put to the church and its ministry, the Bible is normative in shaping how the church must respond.

Even so, to ask what the Bible means by *diakonia*, “service” or “ministry,” is to be faced with the claims of scripture on the church and the ordinands who arise from it. Karl Barth, whom Pope Pius XII called the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas,<sup>139</sup> situates the minister in the forefront of a double expectancy as the Bible is preached. The people expect a revelatory event, to be sure. But there is also a sense of encounter and scrutiny, by which preacher and people will be confronted by the Word as well. Taking into consideration Barth’s sexist language, his insight into the formative power of the Bible on Reformed and Free church conceptions of ministry still blazes through:

The man who stands, perhaps not at the center, but certainly in the foremost and most exposed position, is the Christian preacher, the minister. As the minister of the people who come or do not come to church on Sunday, he must be the first to give them the answer; and as the minister of the Bible he must be the first to be prepared to submit to God’s *question* by asking the question about God, without which God’s answer cannot be given. If he answers the *people’s question* but answers it as a man who has himself been *questioned by God*, then he speaks the word of God...The whole situation in the church suddenly becomes intelligible if it is seen to be the framework for *this* event; the existence of the minister is justified if he makes himself the servant of this event [emphases his].<sup>140</sup>

At its core, then, ministry is service to the Word. As ministers question the Word week-by-week, and especially on ordination day, the Word questions us. That is the sense in which the *diakonia* word group will now be explored.

Scholars have determined that there are two basic definitions of leadership at work in the same term in early Christian communities in the Greco-Roman world. One is as a go-between, a spokesperson, or an ambassador. This go-between sense is associated with the way slaves wait on others at tables, seeing to bodily needs, and in the broader sense with service to persons generally, as in “being at your service.”<sup>141</sup> Sample texts are Mark 1:31 = Matthew 8:15 = Luke 4:39; Mark 15:41 = Matthew 27:55; Luke 8:3; 10:40; and John 12:2 where the emphasis is on practical service such as preparing a meal or waiting on tables, as in the service given to Jesus and his disciples or to Jesus alone. Acts 19:22 has the same sense, as in the service rendered to Paul by Timothy and Erastus.<sup>142</sup> As spokesperson or ambassador, the New Testament puts forward the meaning of *diakonia* in a generalized technical sense that denotes “a function or office within the Church or the action of fulfilling it,” as C. E. B. Cranfield notes.<sup>143</sup> Sample texts include Acts 1:17, 25; 20:24; 21:19; Romans 11:13; 1 Corinthians 12:5; 2 Corinthians 4:1; 5:18 in the sense of the ministry of apostles, evangelists, and prophets. Cranfield goes on to say,

It is not without significance that the technical term for functions in the Church which necessarily involve some measure of leadership has from the first been a word which signifies not pre-eminence or power but simply humble service, and, further, that it is the same word that is used of Christ's own service...and also of the service owed by every Christian to God, Christ, and his fellows [sic].<sup>144</sup>

J. N. Collins has argued that this go-between or mediating service is closely related to service at table and is associated with the idea of ministry as an emissary or spokesperson. The *diakonos*, "minister," then, has derived authority, as does an ambassador from the one who sends her. It is the prerogative of the sender to delegate representative authority to the one who is sent.<sup>145</sup>

The other scholarly opinion of the meaning of the *diakonia* word group rejects the notion of ambassadorship. Andrew Clarke contends that the "servile nature" of service is characteristic of the ministries of Jesus and of Paul. Both Jesus and Paul commend this style of service as incumbent on all Christians, particularly given Paul's refusal of the obsession with status and honor he sees in the society of his day,<sup>146</sup> as in 1 Corinthians 1:12–17 and 2:1–5. Service in Christ means suffering and hardship,<sup>147</sup> as Paul shows in 2 Corinthians 6:4 and 11:23. Clarke argues for an ethical rather than an ecclesial or sacerdotal understanding of service. He concludes, however, that this discussion is not nearly over:

There has been considerable debate over what is conveyed by the *diakonia* word group, especially whether this is a Greek technical term for an intermediary or go-between, or whether the early Christians had made it a Christian technical term for loving service. This particular debate may be inconclusive at present.<sup>148</sup>

So we are presented again with an unresolved set of polarities. What style or nature of leadership are Reformed and Free churches ordaining their sons and daughters to assume? Are they ordained to a ministry of derived authority and honor, or to a ministry that rejects worldly norms of status, honor, and power? Probably more than any so far, these poles seem irreconcilably different.

When seen through a theological lens, however, negotiation between the polarities of ministry as ambassadorship and ministry as humble service can be achieved, to the benefit of a theology of ordination. T. F. Torrance, former moderator of the Church of Scotland and a foremost Reformed theologian, joins these notions in his article "Service in Jesus Christ," found in a festschrift in honor of Karl Barth's eightieth birthday.

Torrance commences by laying out the relation between "charity" and "authority," an inner relationship that makes Christian ministry unique.<sup>149</sup>

Christ commands service in his name, and the servant does so for love's sake. Deeds of humble service, which is the broadest definition of ministry, are done at the behest and by the authority of Jesus Christ, the Lord. The nature of Christian ministry, then, is freedom in service.

Something new is going on here. Torrance calls this "the freedom of the servants of God."<sup>150</sup> From the outside, there appears to be no freedom at all. The servant is a slave to the will of the superior. The things the servant is commanded to do are humble acts, despicable things in some cases, as the example of table service in the New Testament suggests.

Slaves waited tables in the ancient world. It was beneath "decent" people to do this kind of "scut work." As Carolyn Osiek and David Balch have shown, slaves who waited tables and rendered menial service to ancient Mediterranean families were commonly thought to be "dirty" physically and socially. They were segregated in cramped, spare quarters that stood in sharp contrast to the beauty and appointments of the living and dining areas of their owners.<sup>151</sup> So it is little wonder that when texts related to early Lukan communities suggest that at eucharist slave owners were routinely serving slaves, Osiek and Balch can write of the parable of the slave watching in Luke 12:36–38,

When the master returns from the marriage feast to find slaves awake, "he will gird himself and have them sit at table, and he will come and serve them" (v. 37)! Socially, this is upside down, unexpected, suggesting that the masters among the disciples align themselves with the slaves, a contrast to everyday reality in 17:9!<sup>152</sup>

They conclude that this type of reversal is deliberately, provocatively "countercultural." The slave owner, a Christian, is bound by the command of Christ, who himself modeled servant leadership, to serve (*diakon\_sei*) slaves. "Such a symbolic action would have been astounding in a Greco-Roman house."<sup>153</sup>

Torrance teaches that freedom in service is given a whole new meaning by grounding it in Jesus Christ. *Diakonia* is Christo-formed: "It is only in... Jesus that we learn what diakonia really is."<sup>154</sup> There is a servant ethos in Christ. He gave ministry content and pattern by acts of mercy, healings, and nurture of the sick, suffering, and outcast.<sup>155</sup> He does his work as God's servant *par excellence*, serving from two sides: from God to us, and from us to God. The incarnation and the atonement are the service of Christ for us and with us. The One who gives us life beyond our lives becomes united with us in the office of Christ as the Servant of God by deeds of justice and love, all done in humility. Thus meaning, sustenance, and communion are given to the desperate human condition.<sup>156</sup>

The church is diakonically formed. Jesus Christ exercises his messianic office and bids his disciples to serve in his name. Christ is never collapsed into the church. Torrance writes,

It is never the diakonia of the Church to be itself the Christ, but through its humble service [becomes] in history the bodily instrument which Christ uses in the proclamation of the divine mercy to [humankind] and in prompting their responses to that mercy.<sup>157</sup>

Though a charge is given the whole church, *diakonia* is an office within it. Some are “specially called” and given the necessary *charisma* of the Spirit to do the work of ministry.<sup>158</sup> Classically, the great threefold office is used to describe the ministry of Jesus Christ that he shares with the church. These three traditional aspects of Christ the minister are Prophet, Priest, and Sovereign. Torrance contends that the customary use of this doctrine has eclipsed the diakonal aspect of Christ’s servant life in God and therefore has deformed the servant life of the church.<sup>159</sup> Instead of the threefold office, he proposes a twofold ministry:

1. The service of Word and Sacrament, in which (as Barth suggested) ministers serve the proclamation, are stewards of their gifts, and do not offer any of it in their own power. He calls this, in good Reformed fashion, “the presbyteral ministry,” one in which “the ministers act not as representatives of the people, but only as those sent by Christ and commissioned by Him with authority to dispense His Word of forgiveness, and in the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.”<sup>160</sup>
2. “The service of the response to the Word” is the prompting of the community of faith to humble service by the examples of deacons who offer themselves to the service of divine mercy. These servants prompt, guide, and remind the people of the service incumbent on them.<sup>161</sup> This diakonal ministry is representative of the people, though they lack the “commission to exercise authority or pastoral control.”<sup>162</sup>

Torrance reconciles these two forms of ministry in the church by arguing that neither one is dispensable: “They are as necessary and indispensable to one another as husband and wife, and father and mother, in the same family.”<sup>163</sup> As a theologian of the mid-twentieth century, he uses pronouns and metaphors that are not appropriate in our more culturally diverse reality, but Torrance offers good gifts to this study nonetheless. He clearly teaches that ministry, no matter its forms, is always a matter of the creative tension between the poles of freedom and obedience. Christian love is the catalyst of reconciliation between the two. It is the “inner relation” that makes the nature of Christian service unique. The servant of Christ has no self-determination, at least according to worldly standards of freedom. The freedom of the world is what might better be called, “freedom from...” Christ commands, and Christ’s servants obey. But the inner reason for this

obedience is not coercion, which has to do with punishment and fear (1 Jn. 4:18). The reason for obedience in Christian service is love (1 Jn. 4:7–11). God’s love in Jesus Christ generates trusting obedience in love. Those who love God act in accordance with the dictates of that love as a theological necessity:

Whoever says, “I have come to know him,” but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: whoever says, “I abide in him,” ought to walk just as he walked. (1 Jn. 2:4–6)

Freedom in service receives an entirely new definition in Jesus Christ. Obedience in service to Christ is the true freedom (Jn. 8:31–32, 36; 2 Cor. 3:17–18). This new freedom in the service of Christ, seen on the one hand as compelled by love, is better called, “freedom for...”

Informed theologically by a new understanding of the diakonic shape of Christian ministry as obedient service, we are now ready to face the refinement of what Christian ordination means as it is questioned by the Word. The notions of ambassadorship and servanthood might seem to be in contrast given the concerns we import from the conflicts of everyday life. Ambassadors, for instance, embody honor and enjoy diplomatic immunity, delegated from the power who sends them. The English Queen sends royal ambassadors to the far reaches of the globe, and they manifest and represent the majesty of the Crown. Judges on the federal bench represent the majesty of the law in something of the same way. Ambassadorship carries with it a certain cachet and is a sought-after appointment.

Servanthood has accrued honor to itself as well, as the years have rolled by. In the egalitarian atmosphere of twenty-first-century American life, social stratification is not as pronounced as it once was, and slavery is officially abolished and illegal. Slaves no longer serve diners. The wait staff in restaurants who serve tables are paid for their service, some of them handsomely. Waiting tables, the central metaphor for Christian service in the early Lukan and Pauline churches, has come to be held as an honorable profession. A certain élan exists among highly skilled wait staff in the modern world. Additionally, women who set the Thanksgiving banquet table in American family life are held in high esteem, even to the point of being immortalized in Norman Rockwell paintings. The social standing of table service has dramatically changed since the first centuries of Christian life.

Under the questioning of the Word that comes out of this study of *diakonia* in the New Testament, both concepts are put under transforming pressure. For the distance to be closed enough from the first and second

centuries so that something of a Christian understanding of ministry can be determined, both current definitions are going to have to undergo reform.

Ambassadorship must be divested of some of its privilege in order to be a usable Christian metaphor for ministry today. This is especially so in the ecclesiastical sphere. Pastoral ministry is not the same as serving as a Papal Nuncio, who bears the majesty of the Vatican and the diplomatic prerogatives of a civil state. Protestant ministers are envoys, but anything that smacks of authoritarian control rankles Free and Reformed church sensibilities, and should do so. The go-between office of ministry is only as honorable as the Christ who sends it. To exalt Christ with the trappings of state is to make the Constantinian mistake all over again.<sup>164</sup> Protestantism has been clear that the dignity of the ministry does not reside natively in anyone or any group. All ministry is a gift from Christ, the head of the church; and ministry is not the possession of any class or caste in the church. The whole church is the recipient of the gift of ministry, and those who exercise the ministerial office do so by having it bestowed on them by the church. This is the meaning of the priesthood of all believers, as we have seen. Theologically, the ambassadorship of ministry is rooted in the servanthood of Jesus Christ. Christ's service is demonstrated in his self-emptying sacrifice, as in the great kenotic hymn found in Philippians 2:5–11. Discipleship in his name means to imitate Christ in his loving, humble service for the world (Mt. 16:24–26). It means to renounce the status of society in favor of the loving dictates of service, as in the example of the master who puts on an apron to serve household slaves, as in the parable of the watchful slaves in Luke 12:36–38. Such service entails a reversal of the categories of honor and shame in our day, much as it did in the days of the early church. Ambassadorship in Christian ministry is an obedient trust that willingly suffers shame with the Christ: “Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured” (Heb. 13:12–13). The dignity of Christ's ambassadors is in the identification with his passion that his ministers bear in their character. This alone is worthy of praise, as in the case of the discipleship of the apostle Paul, Christ's envoy to the non-Jewish world: “From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (Gal. 6:17).

Servanthood as it is currently understood will have to undergo a two-part redefinition in order to make it a serviceable model for Christian ministry. First, a divestment must occur. Slavery has been cast down as a morally justifiable institution in the modern world. Taking it off the table has freed servanthood of the deleterious effects of association with the ownership of some human beings by others. But service in the church has been guilty of being construed with hierarchies of honor and status and has none of the constraints that secular definitions of menial work used to offer it. When people are called to serve in Reformed and Free church life,

paid or unpaid, it has something of the aroma of recognition and reward about it. How many times have the elected or appointed officeholders of the congregation been talked into it by blandishments such as, “Go ahead and serve. It won’t require much of you”? Nothing could be more corrosive to the notion of Christian discipleship. Church service in the contemporary world is so pale by comparison to the costly servanthood of the New Testament as to be virtually unrelated (see Mk. 8:34–38). Only a massive rationalization can make the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount comfortable enough to read in modern settings that have cost church officers nothing (Mt. 5:1–7:29, especially 5:11–12). The salty nature of Christian service must be recovered in order for a servant ministry with any theological accountability to emerge in today’s church (Mt. 5:13).

The recovery of despicable service is a place to start. That will mean the reintroduction of risk into definitions of ministerial servanthood. A ministry that risks nothing is not Christian in any morally plausible way. To Torrance’s call for servant ministry, there needs to be a strong infusion of prophetic courage. What qualifies as despicable service varies from age to age. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights struggle in the South met this criterion, and yet it is far from finished. In our own time, the human rights struggle of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people offers followers of Christ plenty of risk. The continuing movement to eradicate poverty and disease is a perennial service venue in which disciples may find costly ways to follow the Christ. Sadly, the timidity of the church is often mistaken for prudence, and the risk-averse Protestant ministry will have a difficult time when the great assize of Matthew 25:31–45 occurs. Common ministerial wisdom says that ministers cannot fight every battle. Too many times, this is taken to mean that creative denial of any responsibility for prejudice and injustice is the best career move. It is interesting to listen to so many retired ministers as they reflect on what the Civil Rights era in America required of them. There are many proud stories told. The outcome of that struggle has made identification with African American liberation honorable these days. There were, indeed, some great acts of ministerial courage, but all too few when one actually looks at what was risked and was not. In fifty or a hundred years, what will the inaction of church officers, both clergy and lay, look like? It only took the Southern Baptist Convention 150 years to apologize for the role they played in slavery. Meanwhile, the ecclesial constant in all these social upheavals has been “the smiling, smiling face of the Protestant minister” in all its niceness. It need not be so: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption...if, in fact we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (Rom. 8:15, 17b).

The second movement needed to redefine servanthood is a renewed sense of empowerment. The cachet associated with ambassadorship offers servanthood a boost in esteem and integrity that it currently lacks. Humble,

loving service has never meant groveling. The servants of Jesus Christ comprehended in the meanings flowing from the *diakonia* word group are not doormats. Their character is the seat of a power that comes not from them, but from the Word: “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (Jn. 1:12). This is the power to endure, to stay on mission, as demonstrated by the disciples described in Acts 5:40–42, who refused to cease teaching and preaching the messiahship of Jesus. Though they were warned and flogged, “*they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name*” (v. 41). Ministers are servants of the Word, disciples who have staked their lives on the truthfulness of the gospel story and the proclamation of God’s new order, coming on earth, as it is in heaven. The service they render is practical, for it is engaged in the day-to-day life of real people in society. It is also eschatological, for the servants of Christ are part of God’s purpose to renew and recreate the world (2 Cor. 5:17).

The envoy bears the authority of the one who does the sending. So Paul appeals to the Corinthian church to receive Timothy as they would have received him: “I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me. For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:16–17). As the ambassador of Christ, Paul claims the authority to correct the community of faith as well as nurture it: “For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power. What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?” (1 Cor. 4:20–21). Instead of a license to punish or shame, the authority bestowed on the envoy enables the truth that is often hard to hear to be spoken to churches in love (see Eph. 4:15).

The ordering of ministry is rather clear here. The Servant Christ comes not to conquer the world, but to save it (Jn. 18:33–37; 3:16–17). His incarnation and his atonement are the content of his service to God for humanity. The church he calls out of the world takes up his mission for the life of the world. From among the disciples he calls, there are some women and men who bear the responsibility of mirroring the reflection of Christ the Servant of God before the world. These are the ministers of the church.<sup>16.5</sup> As Timothy to Paul, and Paul to Christ, the servants of God manifest the dynamic identity of ambassadors whose dignity and integrity are anchored in the character formed by the Servant Christ.

Surely this is what is meant in this Disciples of Christ liturgy of ordination, when the gathered community intones the litany:

Leader: Within the Church the fundamental ministry is that of Jesus Christ.

This servanthood, offered to God on behalf of humanity, defines and shapes all ministry in Christ’s name.

People: Lead us into the ministry of Jesus Christ, O God.

Leader: It is within the ministry of the whole people of God that there has been from the beginning a representative ministry called of God and authorized by the Church... Today we come to mark one of the Church's ministers for this representative servanthood on behalf of the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>166</sup>

The *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) clearly affirms the servant style of ministry in the church, too:

The purpose and pattern of leadership in the church in all its forms of ministry shall be understood not in terms of power but of service, after the manner of the servant ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>167</sup>

Liturgy and constitutional affirmation are statements of aspiration—important ones. But the scrutiny of the Word is still on the church as it orders its ministry. To raise the question of what ordination means is to strike right to the heart of the confusion over the form and concept of ministry that has characterized the designation of ministers in the twentieth century.

There has been much domestication of the servants of Christ, making them institutional managers, impresarios, attitude adjusters, and professors.<sup>168</sup> All these attempts to identify ministers with the status quo have grave problems. None of them—nor all of them taken together—approaches the dignity, integrity, and authority of a company of Christian leaders who bear the marks of Christ, rely on the authorization of the Christ whose true story is presented to them in scripture, and collegially offer the world and the church a genuine alternative to violence, hierarchy, and competition, which is the reign of God. The ordained are not simply representative of the ministry of the whole church who authorizes them to serve. Though they are at least that, they are not ultimately that, any more than the church of the present is answerable only to the present. The ordained are, as Barth characterized them, furthest in the forefront, asking the question of God in the Word, and in turn being questioned by the Word. Who are they to claim such an impossible calling? None other than those who have been claimed by the Word as servants.

Zebedee's boys, James and John, came to Jesus and asked him for a favor. Jesus asked what that might be. Why, to be near enough to him to touch his right hand and his left, they said. "But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'" (Mk. 10:38).

Together, the concepts of ambassador and servant work in tandem to describe the heart of the minister's vocation—to be a servant of Jesus Christ. Mutually, these ideas cooperate to offer us a richer understanding of the office to which women and men are ordained when they, like James and John before them, answer, "We are able" (Mk. 10:39), and the church responds, "Amen! They are worthy of the ministry of Jesus Christ."

At the core of what ordination means, then, is this scriptural affirmation that scrutinizes all those who seek to be ordained:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20)

This examination of four sets of polarities has sought new ways of negotiating the distance between these points of view. An examination of the rites of ordination in these churches yet remains to be done. Arising out of this examination is a fifth tension, and then conclusions may be drawn about the relation of these five polarities with one another as a means of getting at the meaning of ordination for Christians in the Free and Reformed traditions.