

## Commission on Ministry.

### Resource Paper: The Theology of Ministry.

#### Introductory.

Although this paper is concerned with the theology of ministry, ordained and lay, it may be helpful to begin by considering the nature of Priesthood, because until quite recently the ministry of the Church has been almost completely bound up with the ordained ministry in thought and practice. To all intents and purposes “ministry” and “ordained ministry” have been regarded as one and the same. “Training for ministry” has invariably meant “preparation for ordination”.

The English word “Priest” is used to translate two different Greek words in the New Testament: *Presbuteros* (from which comes the word “Presbyter”) and *Hiereus*. There is a difference in meaning and significance between the two, which is lost by using the same word to translate both.

The word *Hiereus* is specifically religious or cultic. It refers to the person appointed to offer sacrifice on behalf of the community, and to act as mediator between community and God. Within the New Testament, the word is only ever applied to Jesus: never to any of the leaders of the Church. In that sense, there is only one Priest: Jesus Christ. The religious, cultic priest is no longer necessary.

The word *Presbuteros* is used of leaders within the Church. It can be used in a very loose sense of the kind of wise senior person to whom others naturally turn for advice, but normally it signifies a person specifically identified and authorised to exercise leadership.

However, “Priesthood” (*Hierosune*) is something which every member of the Christian Church possesses, or participates in, by virtue of being incorporated into the Body of Christ, the only *Hiereus*. In that sense every ordained person is a priest, a member of the Church’s Priesthood, not by virtue of ordination but by virtue of baptism. In the same sense, no ordained person is any more a priest than the organist or the child at the font. Within that Priesthood, different people exercise different roles – leadership, administration, teaching and so on.

The exercise of these roles is summed up by the word *Diakonia* – “Ministry” or “Service”.

#### Consequences.

Arising out of these considerations, the following points should be made:

1. Our understanding of ordained ministry – and indeed therefore of all ministry whether ordained or lay – has its roots in whether we see ordination (and with it all of the traditional three orders of ministry) as primarily ontological or practical. A good deal of uncertainty in this area and some blurred distinctions also account for at least some of the current uncertainty which surrounds ministry in the church.
2. Thus there has often been an aura surrounding ordination and a sense (sometimes spelt out) that after ordination one simply “is” that which one has been ordained to be. It is a “status” and indeed a part of one’s “being”. This in turn has led to the placing of ordained ministers on pedestals and the all-too-frequent “caste” division in the church between ordained and lay.

3. This quasi-ontological understanding of ordination also goes a long way to explain much of the contemporary uncertainty over the ordained ministry. The ontological supremacy and caste of those ordained was once also reinforced by circumstances, as they were some of the few literate (and powerful) members of society. But these circumstantial differences are now eroded, and ordained minister and people appear in most respects to be equal. However, the lingering ideas of “caste” and “status” have largely marooned the ordained somehow “above” the people and feeling pretty useless – after all, an educated population no longer needs most of the teaching/advice etc which the ordained person used to be able to give: they are quite capable of finding things out for themselves!
4. I suggest, however, that the above model – though prevalent in church history – is actually a false and unhelpful understanding of ordained ministry. The ordinal, for example, reminds us that one is ordained to **do** certain things; and vitally one cannot simply be ordained, whether deacon, priest or bishop, *in vacuo*. Ordination is **always** to a specific place and role, and therefore one can argue cogently that ordination is primarily practical. Ordained is what ordained does!
5. However, before proceeding we need to remain at this point for a moment and address the commonly held view (not least among ordained ministers) that “You can’t stop being ordained”. Well, actually, yes you can!  
Ordination – understood practically rather than ontologically – confers the right to function as an ordained minister. Thus one can, by retirement or resignation, forfeit this right to function until it is next conferred by a subsequent institution, licensing or whatever. In the meantime one has only the potential to function as an ordained minister – which is what ordination conveys: the right to function **as**, not the ontology to **be**.
6. So what is the function of an ordained minister? I would suggest in the first instance a fairly restricted range of activities (which may then of course be added to by purely practical considerations in any specific place, although it should be remembered that these additional activities are not themselves ordination-specific: they simply arise out of the exigencies of a particular parish ministry). But in the most general terms, it might be argued that the function of the order of ministry which we customarily call priest is:
  - a) to preside at the Eucharist
  - b) to pronounce absolution and blessing in the name of the Trinity.
  - c) to be the chief pastor in the parish (though not the only one!!)
  - d) to make available to others a theological and spiritual competence acquired as a result of his/her particular training and priestly formation.
7. This form of priesthood next needs to be seen as a ministry in relationship with other ministries. And, indeed, this becomes much easier if ordination is seen as practical and not ontological. This is so because in a “practical” ordained ministry, similar ideas apply to the other recognised ministries of the church such as diocesan or parish readers. Matters of Church order dictate that these roles which involve “restricted” responsibilities such as preaching and the administration of the consecrated elements at Holy Communion) are the subject of a special commissioning and are marked out by the wearing of liturgical garments etc.

8. This leads on then to the ministry of the whole church, and to the question of why the church should or should not specially commission and mark out the ministry of every believer. Purely personally, I am very much of the “don’t put them all into cassocks” school of thought. For it is only necessary and appropriate to mark out those whom Church order has commissioned for specific functions of a “restricted” nature. Thus a parochial pastoral ministry team should not be commissioned (and I suggest that this applies even when the question of financial remuneration comes into the equation) – for however much of it they do they are simply doing what all Christian people are commissioned to do by virtue of their baptism.
  
9. The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that over the next generation or so the church needs to find a new understanding of the relationships involved in ministry which sees clergy and lay people as entirely equal and in which ministry is collaborative. We need to do away with caste and status and recognise that function is the only distinction. To think like this also has the benefit that it removes the burden from the ordained minister of thinking that he/she is responsible for everything in ministry. His or her specific responsibilities are actually quite small, and the rest is, or, theologically speaking, should be, shared with the whole people of God.

Collaborative ministry is theologically, pastorally and practically the only ministry which recognises both the calling of baptism and the very specific calling to ordination and relates them one to the other as complementary equals.

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