

Paul Wilson

*Thinking about One Order of Ministry* (2014) has started a discussion about theology of ministry that is much needed in the United Church of Canada. I am saddened that on matters central to the church's life and identity the authoring committee chose not to probe deeply into theological matters. It cites no experts in pneumatology, ecclesiology, or church history and includes no representatives from our theological schools. At times it seems to dismiss theology as "traditional language" and current orders merely as "established ways of expressing one's self-identity" (p.2). Its final recommendations seem less guided by the economy of God's saving ways than by economies of the marketplace.

How we understand ministry is related to how we understand the church. The Nicene Creed identified four attributes of the church: *one* (united in Christ, see Eph. 4:4-6), *holy* (set apart by Christ for his purposes), *catholic* (worldwide and inclusive) and *apostolic* (living faith handed down from the Apostles). Reformed thought adds two<sup>1</sup>: the Word 'truly' or 'purely' preached (see for instance the *Westminster Confession*, 25:4) and the sacraments 'rightly' administered. Words like true, pure, and right are contested today (e.g., by whose definition?)—here they refer to the apostolic and catholic nature of the gospel communicated (as opposed to other gospels, see Gal. 1:6-7).

Education is central for Reformed and Methodist ministry. Ephesians emphasizes different gifts of the Spirit (4:11-12; see 1 Tim. 3&4) "to equip the saints" for different ministries. It cautions against being "tossed to and from and blown about by every wind of doctrine" (4:14). Paul said teaching is to be based in Scripture ("Nothing beyond what is written" - 1 Cor 4:6), and preaching is to be "nothing among you except Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 2:2; see Col. 2:2-3).

Academically, Paul's reference to Jesus Christ can mean: 1) communication of scriptural witness concerning the incarnation, Jesus' life, teachings, death, resurrection, ascension, and Second Coming; 2) a means of reading the Bible as the church's book (Luke 24:27); 3) the education, wisdom, training, and gifts of the Spirit needed to apply scriptural meaning to today; 4) Christ's living presence in the preached Word; and 5) gracious empowerment in the Spirit for the demands of discipleship. Paul's own preaching was "not with eloquent wisdom" or persuasive techniques, "so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power" (1 Cor. 1:17). Preaching is not mere information: "Whoever listens to you listens to me..." (Luke 10:16). It is sacramental in that it offers God in Christ through the Spirit.

The activity or agency of the Triune God is key to a theology of ministry. *One Order* largely overlooks this basic reality of the church and thus misreads, not least, the nature and depth of likely ecumenical response to its proposals. As Christ makes himself known

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to several people, including John Vissers of Knox College, Toronto, for conversation on these matters.

at Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32), Christ reveals himself in Word and sacraments as a means of grace for the church today. Christ presides at the table and through the Spirit orders the church. As a colleague has said, “The church does not order itself, Christ does and we do our best to correspond to the order given. Ordination is not an act of bestowal but recognition.”<sup>2</sup> The church also does not initiate the call to ordered ministry or offer the gifts of the Spirit, God does. Ordered ministers are ‘set apart’ for life by God through the church, to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17) and to be particular stewards of the living Christian faith, the ‘treasure in a field’ or ‘pearl of great value’ gained at great price (Matt. 13:44-45).

God does not call everyone to care for the church at large through education, training, and a life dedicated to scholarly study. On behalf of the whole people of God, ordered ministers are theologians-in-residence who think deeply about Scripture and the world. They are also poets-in-residence, attentive to the power of words and the beauty, coherence, and mystery of the faith. They need training to be not least: immersed in the content of the Bible, its composition, and its methods of interpretation; knowledgeable of Christian history and tradition so as to avoid the mistakes and benefit from the insights of the past; critically engaged with theological topics central to church beliefs (e.g., the nature of God, Christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and ecclesiology) so as to rethink them for every age; gifted with imagination and poetry to speak of God today in significant, invitational, and transforming ways; attuned to science and the social sciences; tutored in skills that enable pastoral ministry; informed about social contexts and diverse cultures and their relationships to the church; and able to be faithful representatives of the church as it relates to cultures at large and conducts God’s missions in the world. This is a tall order.

All members through their baptism are called to lay ministry, to “proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15), to be witnesses to “the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). ‘Appointment, designation, or authorization’ to preach or administer the sacraments, or to serve in various administrative roles in the church, is a form of licensing with special permission limited to particular conditions and oversight. Even as the Holy Spirit said, “set aside for me Paul and Barnabas for the work to which I have called them” (Acts 13:2), the Spirit continues to ‘set apart’ people with different gifts for diverse ministries that serve God’s overarching purposes. Differing levels of remuneration can be a way of recognizing differing gifts and responsibilities.

It is unwise to confuse a call to lay ministry with a call to ordered ministry, or to devalue lay ministry or the education needed for ordered ministers, or to fail to recognize different divine callings. Paul used the metaphor of different members of one body (1 Cor. 12: 12-31) to point to horizontal understandings of authority in team membership, where people have different roles but all are equally needed and valued. Anxiety concerning vertical authority is appropriate yet should not obscure the fact that both unity

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Topping, Principal of Vancouver School of Theology, in a personal email.

and diversity of ministries are gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:1-11) and the only hierarchy is Christ over all.

Questions arise: does the church live up to these high standards? Do ordered ministers necessarily care for the church as a whole or tend to the gospel in preaching? Are ordered ministers necessarily more learned or gifted than laity? Are Western standards and methods of education necessarily appropriate for First Nations? Does the church exercise the role it might in ensuring standards for ordered ministers? Do theological schools necessarily take their lead from the church and its needs?

The answer to these questions may be *no*, and that may be part of the impetus behind the *One Order* proposal. Still, the church is guided not just by what might seem practical or economical. Were minimal standards of ministry preparation to become the norm, the church might lose the ability to engage its traditions and to form people for ministry in ways that are faithful and resonate with United Church ethos. William Willimon calls on theological schools “to train the church’s leaders in a rigorously theological refurbishment of the church.”<sup>3</sup> The church would be foolish to change basic realities of its ordered life to meet some needs of the church that *One Order* identifies. I believe the church should devote more of its depleting resources to education, evangelism, and recruitment for ministry, to ‘church planting’ and house churches, to increased attention to Bible, theology, and to God who orders church life.

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<sup>3</sup> William Willimon, “The Goal of Seminary: Making Ministry Difficult,” *The Christian Century* (Feb. 20, 2013), 12.