

Harold Wells: Christological and Biblical Reflections on Ministry

Since this is the initial installment in a series on the recent United Church document, “One Order of Ministry,” I will begin by reflecting on the Christological and biblical foundations of “ministry.” Inevitably we do so from within our Reformed and Methodist heritage, but also for our own time and place, and our own denomination.

First, we need have no illusion that the scripture provides an authoritative ecclesial polity for all time. We do not imagine that Jesus himself laid down a permanently correct ecclesial structure. We differ from Catholic ecclesiologies, which regard ordination as a sacrament, make very sharp distinctions between the ordained and the laity, and teach that the threefold hierarchical ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon is permanently normed by scripture. Our United Church has never claimed that the particular details of its structure are divinely mandated. The New Testament does offer glimpses into the early decades of the church’s life and order, reflecting perhaps Jesus’ relationship to his disciples and followers; what we find there offers important insight into what constitutes an appropriate ordering of the church. But it’s not obvious that the church in our time should simply mimic what we find in Acts or epistles. What we find in the New Testament and early church history is a dynamic, fluid order, evolving to meet the needs of a rapidly growing movement in that ancient context.

Jesus Christ the *Diakonos*

As the document, “The Meaning of Ministry” (2009) makes clear, Christian ministry is founded in the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ, which is God’s mission to the world. The apostle Paul tells us, “no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ” (I Cor 3:11). The ministry of Jesus, initiated at his baptism and empowered by the Spirit (Lk 4:16), was one of servanthood. As *diakonos*, he “came not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45). Jesus, as Lord, was the highest authority for his disciples, but his authority was that of a servant – indeed, that of a slave (*doulos*) who washes feet (John 13:16). He enjoins his followers also to “wash one another’s feet.” Jesus is not a dead prophet, but the risen and living Lord. Our ministry, then, is a participation in his continuing ministry, in the power of the Spirit. Our Reformed tradition, choosing the term “minister” (servant) for its leadership, has been on solid Christological ground. (See Calvin’s *Institutes*, Bk IV, iii.) That tradition, since the 16th century, has always been suspicious of hierarchy, and of every kind of domination in the church, and so replaced powerful bishops with the shared oversight of a presbytery. So too, since the latter part of the 20th century, under the influence of feminist thought, we have grown even more critical of continuing forms of domination and inequality. Our modern/post-modern and democratic commitments to equality have Christological roots: Jesus, as champion of women, of children, of the sick and disabled, of the poor and sinners, favours the equality of all persons in the church. Paul reflects this bias in Galatians 3:28: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, are all one in Christ. Today we may well add ordered and lay. So – the basic motive underlying of “One Order of Ministry” is a good one.

Who is a Priest?

But what sort of ordered ministry, if any, do we find in the New Testament? It is notable that nowhere in the New Testament do we hear of a Christian office of priesthood.

In the Hebrew scriptures, temple priests who offered sacrifices were mediators between God and the people, and in the New Testament such a priest was referred to as *hiereus*. In Ephesians we hear of “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers” (4:11-12). No priests are mentioned. It is Jesus Christ, we are told elsewhere, who is the “great high priest,” who mediates God’s grace and mercy in time of need (Heb 4:14-16). In Revelation we hear of the “saints,” who have been made “a kingdom and priests” (1:6, 5:10), referring to Christians in general, not to a special class of Christians. Again, in I Peter 2:5 the church is described as “a holy priesthood.” It is every Christian, then, and the church as a whole, who mediate God’s grace to the world. That is why Luther spoke of “the priesthood of all believers.” This understanding should militate against any very rigid boundaries about who may preside at sacraments. The holy communion is not a sacrifice, and the presider is not a priest sacrificing Christ at the table. Nor do ordained ministers have a special capacity to consecrate the elements. Though we may choose to limit authorization to preside – to guard the integrity of the event – we are right to adopt a certain flexibility in this.

Who is Called?

For a long time the notion of “the call of God” has been appropriated by the ordained or “ordered.” Article XVII of the Basis of Union speaks of Christ calling men and women to an Ordained Ministry of Word, Sacrament and Pastoral Care, and a Diaconal Ministry of Education, Service and Pastoral Care. We have seldom spoken of the call of all Christians to ministry (service and servanthood). We note that in the New Testament the notion of “call” applies to all Christians, and not to a special group of leaders. In key texts about the various ministries of the church (Rom 12, I Cor 12) the term “call” is absent. They speak rather of “gifts” for different forms of service. Even Ephesians 4, which speaks of ministries of leadership – equipping the saints for the work of ministry (*diakonias*) – speaks not of “call,” but of “gifts.” One exception is Paul himself, who speaks of his own call to be an apostle (Rom 1:1, I Cor. 1:1). Otherwise, the term “called” (*kletos*) is used over and over again to refer to a summons to all Christians: e.g., “called to be saints” (Rom 1:7, I Cor 1:2), “called to freedom” (Gal 5:13), “called to one hope” (Eph 4:4), “called out of darkness” (I Pet 2:9). The document under consideration speaks rightly of the ministry of the whole people of God. We moved in this direction in “A New Creed,” which declares that we [all] are “called to be the church....” Our new subordinate standard, “Song of Faith,” also affirms: “God calls all followers of Jesus to Christian ministry.... In the church, some are called to specific ministries of leadership, both lay and ordered....” The distinction is affirmed, but it is always wrong to regard some Christians as “more called” than others.

Ministries of Leadership in the New Testament

Some members of the body who possess gifts of leadership have always been recognized and authorized in the church. The apostles exercised great authority in the earliest church as “eyewitnesses and servants of the Word.” (Lk 1:2) The Reformed tradition has usually regarded their ministry as unrepeatable, and so we have not acknowledged an “apostolic succession” of the ordained. But then there were the prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, who possessed gifts to “equip the saints, for the work of *diakonias*” (Eph 4:11-12), and who, therefore, performed some of the leadership functions of the apostles, especially after the latter had passed away.

The persons whom we in the United Church call “ordered” ministers (ordained and diaconal), surely possess and exercise these same gifts for equipping the saints. The later books of the NT depict a more institutionalized church leadership in a second or third generation, speaking of the “elder” (*presbuteros*, or presbyter) – building on an ancient Mosaic tradition (“elders of the Jews” – Lk 7:3, Num 11:16). An elder or presbyter seems to be a local leader “in each town” (Titus 1: 5), “appointed [or, in some translations, ‘ordained’] in each church with prayer and fasting” (Acts 14:23). Hands were laid upon Timothy by a council of elders to undertake his ministry (I Tim 4:14). The elders, who labour in preaching and teaching, are said to “rule,” and to be worthy of financial support (I Tim 5:17-18).

In his much earlier letter to the Corinthians, Paul had offered a spirited argument that he and Barnabas deserved to be supported financially in their ministries, though he himself claimed that he took no pay (I Cor 9:3-18). In Acts 18:3 we learn that he, with Aquila and Priscilla, practiced tent-making, i.e., supported themselves financially while carrying out their ministries. We know that “tent-making” or “non-stipendiary” ordered ministries exist in some places, especially in parts of the global south, where small, poor congregations cannot afford to pay a living wage to full-time ministers. In future years we may see more of this in Canada. “Ordered” ministry may well be paid, but should not be defined by this.

In the later epistle to Timothy we read also of the bishop (*episkopos*) – or supervisor, who must be “an apt teacher,” and whose moral qualities are to be exemplary (I Tim 3:1-7), though this is not yet the monarchical episcopacy of later centuries. The epistle to Titus ascribes these same gifts and moral attributes to the *presbuteros*, but that term seems to be used interchangeably with *episkopos* (Tit 1: 5, 8). Again, we read of deacons (*diakonoi*/servants). Although the term *diakonos* (and associated verbs) is often used in its general sense, and applied to Jesus and to all Christians, it is also used to refer to a particular office in the church. Perhaps at first they were tasked with providing food to widows (Acts 6:1-6). Philippians speaks of *episkopois* and *diakonois* together (1:1) as offices. In I Timothy 3 deacons must “hold fast to the mystery of faith,” and are said to have admirable qualities equivalent to those of a bishop. In Rom 16:1 we learn of Phoebe, a “deaconess.”

What we observe in these texts is a fluid evolution of various church offices of leadership, which were probably not the same in every location, and which the early church developed in relation to the needs of a growing church in that ancient context. We may surmise that at least the *episkopos* and *presbuteros* (supervisor and elder) were more or less equivalent ministries of leadership, and possibly the *diakonos* (deacon) also. We don’t hear of an “order of ministry” as such. But the fact that some are “paid” (I Tim 5:18) would seem to indicate that, perhaps in the context of a growing church late in the first century, a distinction something like ours between “ordered” and “lay” became necessary and began to be recognized.

Precedents for Lay Ministries

To return to our own time: a key concern in “One Order of Ministry” is the Designated Lay Minister, a person whose work resembles that of ordered ministers, while remaining “lay.” To put it into perspective I would mention two similar ministries. One is the long, venerable practice of lay preaching in our Methodist tradition. John Wesley, in the

18th century, trained and encouraged large numbers of lay preachers and “class leaders,” men and women (!) who evangelized, preached, and/or exercised teaching and pastoral roles in the “class meetings,” which were so essential to that highly fruitful movement. Wesley, an ordained Anglican priest, functioned as a kind of *episkopos*, supervising this whole evangelical enterprise. There was no question of ordaining these lay preachers or class leaders, who made their living in other occupations, but who, through powerful gifts of the Spirit, were indispensable to the success of the Methodist movement, and no less “called” than the ordained.

Another case is that of lay leaders (sometimes called “evangelists”) who function within various Protestant churches in Africa. I knew this practice well in Lesotho, southern Africa. Ordained ministers preside over huge parishes, consisting sometimes of more than a dozen congregations in small, remote locations. Local lay leaders lead worship, preach, and offer pastoral care (though not the sacraments) to these congregations in circumstances where the ordained minister lives too far away and lacks means of transportation to reach them every week. The evangelists are trained, but at a much lesser educational level than that of the ordained ministers. Though they usually have some other occupation, often subsistence farming, some evangelists are also paid. It is a fact, however, that such a church cannot function without the ministries of these lay leaders, who were surely no less “called” than their ordained supervisors.

Confusion about Lay and Ordered

Further entries to follow in this series will no doubt address the specific proposals and options of “One Order of Ministry” more extensively than I can here. Briefly, I suggest that a well-educated, “professional” ministry is more needed today than ever before. We need those who are deeply knowledgeable in scripture, theology, the history of the tradition, and pastoral practice. In our complex 21st century world we need a university-educated ministry of those who are able to be in dialogue with other religions and philosophies, with science and social science, and with contemporary culture. It would be unfortunate, I think, if this kind of preparation for ministry were diminished, or to become exceptional.

The document affirms that “basic equivalency in educational preparation should be required for all who serve in direct leadership of congregations and communities of faith.” It also indicates that ordered ministries and Designated Lay Ministries are “functionally indistinguishable.” If this is so, it is not clear why the latter would be distinguished in any way from the ordained. If preparation really is equivalent, it would seem reasonable simply to ordain them all alike, and accord to all the same privileges and responsibilities. But presumably those who now serve as Designated Lay Ministers do so because they are unable or unwilling to undertake the long educational process, or meet the stringent assessment requirements, expected of ordained or diaconal ministers. Presumably also, in their present roles they perform extremely important functions, essential to the life of many congregations of our church. They often exhibit powerful gifts for ministry, and are certainly not less “called” than ordained or diaconal ministers. To discontinue the use of the term “ordination” to include these in the one order of ministry would be unfortunate, because of its historical and ecumenical significance. At the same time, to eliminate the tradition of “lay preachers,” lay worship leaders or lay pastoral care givers, would also be a great loss to the church.

The effort to move beyond hierarchy and inequality is commendable. It is important that ordered ministers recognize the great value and importance of the ministries of all the saints, and to realize that their only function is to empower the ministries of others. We remember too that we are all called to wash one another's feet. Paul says it well in the letter to the Philippians: "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves" (2:3).

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