

## Dale Skinner: Reflections on One Order of Ministry

Ministry, it seems, is as much a matter of identity as it is a matter of function. There is a great deal in the “One Order” proposal that speaks to this impact of identity in the church’s understanding of ministry. How do we understand ourselves? How do others understand us? These appear to be two of the identity related questions that lay beneath the surface of the “One Order” proposal. These questions are also ones that many of us have wrestled with through the work of our own discernment. Yet, as one reads through the *Thinking About One Order* proposal, one will not find much discussion in regards to the work of discernment as it relates to the ministry needs of the church. The only appearance of the word “discernment” in the *Thinking About One Order* paper is in the quote taken from 1 Corinthians 12. Something tells me that a more robust conversation about the work of discernment is needed as we consider what would be major categorical shifts in our understanding of ministry.

The stories and traditions of our faith are filled with accounts of ones who engaged in significant periods of discernment before assuming a particular role within the life of God’s people. Biblical examples include the account of Moses spending time in the land of Midian with Jethro, the experience of young Samuel under the tutelage of Eli in the temple, and that of the disciples as they purposefully followed and learned from Jesus during the years of his earthly ministry. These periods of discernment required an investment of time and a commitment that gave way to intentional learning, testing, spiritual maturation and growth. Keeping in mind the Reformed tradition that discerns both the “inward” and “outward” call, these examples and others support a belief that the shaping of a call to ordered ministry or any ministry is rooted in more than just one’s “self-understanding.”

The authenticity and understanding of one’s Christian identity and ministry should never rest on the opinion of any single person, group, or congregation. The discernment of a call happens in community, it is relational, and involves a variety of contexts. For me, this journey of discernment began many years ago when I wrestled with a call to the Christian faith. It was not a discerning done on my own; although there were times of solitude and private prayer, it included many facets such as Scripture, university studies, congregational life, numerous conversations with individuals and other experiences. Although I eventually had to choose to make the commitment and say “yes” to a Baptismal Ministry in the church, it was never a solitary process. The same can be said of my path to ordination. As my journey continued and I became more engaged in the life and the work of the church, the combination of my own wonderings and the words of others led me into the church’s formal process of discernment to determine a call to Ordered Ministry. Yes, I serve a particular role and function, but it is not “my” ministry just as it was not “my” discernment. It was the discernment of the Spirit by the church through which I found myself placed in the church’s fuller expression of ministry. As individuals make their vows and as the church as a whole recognizes a ministry, the work of discernment—the work of the Spirit—finds fullness of expression, authenticity and authority.

The proposal for *One Order of Ministry* risks not only “lumping together” ministries in the church, it also risks depreciating the work of discernment. If the goal becomes

“recognition” or “status” the necessity for discernment is lessened or the criteria relating to it changes significantly. It is quite possible that “one order” of ministry ends up being understood as “the one category” of ministry. What the church could end up with is a ministry “caste” where only those in Ordered Ministry are seen as doing the work of the church. I realize this may already exist to a certain extent, but I don’t believe the “One Order” proposal to be a solution. This distortion of ministry has a long history. There have always been some who behave as if the only way to live out their Baptismal calling and “be” a Christian is to be in Ordered Ministry. This was something I became aware of years ago in my seminary studies where I encountered many fellow students who were discerning their initial call to be a Christian. Some believed that the call of their Baptismal Ministry was synonymous with a call to Ordered Ministry because that was where the “real” work of ministry happens. Although some of these individuals may have been suitable for the work of “ordered” ministry, their lack of discernment at that point in time was evident.

The work of discernment within the “One Order” proposal could also be impacted in other ways. For example, lessening educational requirements or time spent in formal learning, reduces the ways in which universities, seminaries, and supervised education contribute to the work of ongoing discernment. Students and ministry candidates would likely spend less time on the kind of personal and communal discernment that aid in their formation and readiness. With the pressures our church and its communities of faith face from without and within, the purpose, place, and time given to discernment needs our full attention. The church requires leaders and teachers who have been tested, well educated, and equipped. They need to be affirmed in their callings and secure in their identity. It’s not about categories or status, it’s about ensuring that the church as a whole is committed to the faithful support and preparation of ones identified as called to lead and called to serve.

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