Rethinking Ordination

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Nearly all the pastors in our Fellowship are ordained to the gospel ministry. Many of our church members have attended an ordination service, and a number have attended an ordination council as well. We are familiar with the procedure, but are we certain we understand why we practice it? Is the idea of ordination a Biblical one? If so, do we thoroughly grasp its Biblical significance? Is the commonly practiced procedure the one most in accord with Biblical guidelines as to ordination's importance? These vital questions deserve careful consideration.

Biblical Evidence of Ordination

Although the Scriptures do not specify all the details concerning an ordination procedure, the Bible gives enough information to establish important elements. To begin, the Bible validates the idea of ordination itself. The English word “ordain” in the Bible often has the significance of “appoint” or “set apart,” without referring to an act of ordination to a ministry. However, some occurrences do have the idea of setting a person apart to a particular ministry. In the Old Testament, for example, the Hebrew phrase mille yad (literally, “fill the hand”) “refers to consecration of individuals for functions within the community.”

This phrase is used in the setting apart of the priests for their service in Exodus 28:41, where it is translated “consecrate” in the KJV and “ordain” in the NASB (see also Exodus 29:9, 29, 33, 35 and Leviticus 8:33). Indeed, the procedure of “commissioning for a specific office or task was normally accompanied by the laying on of hands (cf. Moses’ inauguration of Joshua [Numbers 27:22, 23] and Acts 13:1–3).”

We find similar examples in the commissioning of the gatekeepers for their temple ministry (1 Chronicles 9:22), and even when evil priests were set apart for idolatry (2 Chronicles 11:15).

In the New Testament, various Greek words relate to this subject. For example, in Mark 3:14 Jesus “ordained” (KJV) or “appointed” (NASB) the twelve apostles, where the verb poieo simply means He “made” them apostles. Similarly, the Lord “appointed” the Seventy in Luke 10:1, where the verb anadeiknumi “signifies to appoint to a position or a service.”

In neither case is the idea of a formal ordination service included in the term. However, when we remember that the Son of God Himself made these appointments and that they were to official positions and responsibilities, we see a similarity to the modern ordination practice. Today’s ordination procedure seeks to identify those whom the Lord calls to serve Him in an official capacity.

More directly related to the idea of ordination are other New Testament references. For example, the Greek word cheiraiosen, used in Acts 14:23, has the meaning of stretching out one’s hand in a vote, to choose by vote, “to appoint with the approval of an assembly.”

Although the exact procedure is not specified, the term clearly stresses the fact of an official action taken in the selection of the elders/pastors in that context. Similarly, the use of kathistemi in Titus 1:5 refers to an official action, “to set in an elevated position, in an office.”

Again, the exact procedure is not specified, but the principle of ordination is established. As Anderson correctly observes concerning Titus 1:5, “When the church recognized that a particular individual had
certain necessary qualifications, some type of public ceremony was held to acknowledge the special role in the church that individual would be taking.7 The church at Antioch set apart Paul and Barnabas as they began their first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3). The church followed precise instructions from the Lord to separate the men to their new ministry and publicly laid hands on them. This action was similar to the modern ordination service. However, some argue it was not an ordination, since Barnabas and Paul had already been actively serving the Lord for some time. However, it is the first recorded occasion that the Holy Spirit directly set them apart to a specified ministry, and it was only fitting that a public recognition of that ministry should occur.

Paul's letters to Timothy further confirm the principle of ordination. Paul testified that at a certain time in Timothy's life the "presbytery," a group of pastors (elders), laid hands on him in some kind of official recognition service (1 Timothy 4:14). Paul himself was a part of that group (2 Timothy 1:6). Furthermore, Paul's exhortation to "lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Timothy 5:22) relates directly to this matter. Some commentators seek to relate 5:22 to the restoration of a repentant sinner. However, such a view does not account for the fact that nowhere in Scripture is the laying on of hands used of such a restoration. Rather, the consistent Biblical use of laying on of hands concerns recognizing those with gifts for ministry. This verse, therefore, is an "injunction against a hasty initial ordination."8

Paul's great emphasis on proving the character of those going into the ministry is further testimony to the importance of the concept of ordination. While 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 come immediately to mind, many passages in the pastoral epistles set forth the high requirements of the man set aside for the gospel ministry (e.g., 1 Timothy 1:8, 19; 4:14-18; 2 Timothy 2:1-26). We need to capture afresh this emphasis in our contemporary ordination practice.

**Typical Ordination Procedures**

In the course of the thirty years of my ministry, I have participated in many ordination councils, some of them for men in churches I pastored. I wish that I could say that every one of those men was still faithfully serving the Lord today. It is not so. All of us are painfully aware of the failures in the ministry, men who are no longer actively serving Christ. Some fail because of moral reasons or because they are too interested in the business of this world. Others fail because they neglect their family and have catastrophes in that area. Some fail because they do not have the commitment to Christ to endure when they run into the problems and heartaches of the ministry, and they conclude that the ministry is simply not worth the emotional and spiritual pain. I believe that we could help prevent such failures through an improved ordination procedure. Such a procedure would help to identify those who probably should not enter the ministry in the first place. It would also help to prepare better those who are truly called so that they will complete the race that God gives them.

Today's ordination procedure typically begins with an ordination council composed of pastors, youth pastors, and college or seminary professors invited by the church to participate. Often a council will meet on a Friday or Saturday afternoon, sometimes followed by a dinner. Exactly who and how many will actually appear for the council is not known until the day of the council. These men normally attend at their own expense, taking time away from their own ministries to participate. They do it because they love the Lord and are committed to the continuation of His work. Sometimes many will attend, and at other times only a few come. Some seem to go with their standard "pet questions," which they ask at every ordination council they participate in. The ordination council commonly focuses on the candidate's doctrinal statement, which typically follows the standard categories of systematic theology. The ordination council asks questions about this doctrinal statement for a couple of hours. Little, if any, in-depth advance thinking and planning by the council members go into this procedure. They normally do not even see the candidate's doctrinal statement until after they arrive for the council meeting.

Often, before the doctrinal examination begins, the candidate will take a few minutes and give a brief testimony of his salvation and call to ministry, but council members usually treat this time as a prelude to the more "important" issue of the doctrinal statement. After the doctrinal examination has ended (usually when the allotted time for the council is almost expended), the council members may ask a few questions about the candidate's spiritual life or maybe even about Baptist distinctives.

After the council approves the candidate, the church holds the ordination service. The service may be scheduled for the evening after the afternoon council, or at the latest on the immediate Sunday following the afternoon council. Of course, the candidate's family, friends, and relatives—some coming from great distances—have been invited weeks in advance to attend the ordination service.

This entire procedure virtually guarantees the ordination of every
candidate, whether he should be ordained or not. How many ordination councils are actually going to vote not to recommend the candidate for ordination, when the church has already made the arrangements to hold the service that very weekend? I have never known it to happen, even when it should have. If the council were to vote no, how many churches would actually cancel the ordination service and face the prospect of telling all those who had invited that the service will not occur?

What if the council has some reservations about the candidate's worthiness or qualifications? This method virtually assures that the council will simply recommend to the ordaining church that the candidate "be instructed" in areas in which they perceive him as lacking. Does such instruction take place? If so, is it given with any consistency or depth? Most likely, it is not.

Reevaluating Ordination Procedures

Now is the appropriate time for us to rethink the ordination procedure. We need to evaluate what our process has been, but more importantly we need to face consistently ignored crucial areas.

What about serious questions concerning the candidate's personal life? What testimony or evidence does the candidate give concerning a blameless reputation, sound judgment, and personal discipline? How does the candidate demonstrate he is even-tempered, patient, free from the love of money, managing his finances well, and devoted to things of eternal value? Who bears witness that the candidate lives a godly life and does not insist on his own rights? How does the candidate demonstrate his devotion to his wife, that he has a healthy and proper relationship with her, that he manages his family well, and that his children are under control?

When does the average council earnestly question the candidate concerning his hospitableness or his ability to minister God's Word effectively? What people outside the church bear record to the candidate's reputation? What is the witness of those in the community where the candidate lives?

What is the candidate's knowledge of God's Word? Yes, the council appropriately asks questions concerning the candidate's doctrine, but what about knowledge of Bible content? Can the candidate relate the sequence of events in the book of Genesis? What is the purpose of Leviticus in the Word of God? Why did Jesus quote from Deuteronomy and not Psalms when the Devil tempted Him? What are the theme and flow of thought in the book of Romans? Why are there three Synoptic Gospels? What is the aim of the book of Hebrews? How does Revelation relate to the church today? What are the essential hermeneutical principles that govern interpretation of the Scriptures?

When do we seriously question the candidate concerning matters of pastoral ministry? What is the primary purpose of a local church? What are the goals and aims of a church, and how are they best implemented? What are the Baptist distinctive, and how well does the candidate truly grasp their significance in this increasingly pluralistic society? What is the candidate's approach to homiletics? What procedure does he use in sermon preparation? What is the role of the Holy Spirit in his preaching and ministry? What is the candidate's approach to counseling? What is his personal ethical system, and how does the holiness of God and Christian liberty relate to it? When is it appropriate to practice church discipline, and what is the procedure to follow? How does the candidate prioritize items of ministry? How does he determine a daily schedule? How much time should he devote each week to sermon preparation, church ministry, church administration? How many hours a week will he spend with his wife and family? How will he deal with interruptions to his schedule?

What about issues related to evangelism and missions? How does the candidate explain the gospel to an unsaved person? How does he maintain interest in and knowledge of missions? What differentiates home missions from foreign missions, and why? How can a local church be sensitive to an unsaved person who attends a church service? What types of community outreach should a church practice? How can a church develop or improve a missions emphasis? When should a new convert be baptized? What is a proper procedure for receiving new members into a church?

The foregoing questions are only a few that the typical ordination council bypasses. As a result, we are not fulfilling our responsibilities to set aside qualified men to the highest of all God's callings, that of the ministry of His Word. If we are to take this issue seriously, then the ordination procedure needs improvement. Consider an alternate approach that is more consistent with the standards of God's Word.

A Suggested Ordination Procedure

Instead of inviting many pastors and others to come to an ordination council and then waiting to see who arrives, specifically invite a limited number and give them particular assignments for the council meeting. For example, invite four or five qualified men to form the official council, and ask all the deacons of the ordaining church to attend. Plan to reimburse each of those invited for his travel expenses, and give each a generous honorarium to recognize his time and efforts to prepare for the council meeting. Assign the invited men areas in which to focus their
questions, and expect them to prepare diligently for the council.

Assign one man the candidate's personal life and qualifications, salvation, call to the ministry, and matters related to Baptist distinctives.

Give a second man Bible content, both the Old and New Testaments.

Invite the third man to focus on areas of systematic and contemporary theology, including any local "hot topics" particularly applicable to the candidate's potential ministry.

The fourth man can be assigned the area of pastoral ministry, encompassing such items as philosophy and polity of church ministry, homiletics, counseling, ethics, priorities, evangelism, and missions.

Instead of expecting the ordination council to extend for two or three hours, plan for a full Saturday to allow time for a thorough examination of the candidate. A suggested council schedule for four invited participants follows. If five were invited, the topics and times would need to be altered accordingly.

Such an approach to the ordination council takes the process seriously. It requires much from the candidate and from the council members. It encompasses the full range of areas that are vitally important in and to the gospel ministry. It deals with all the questions enumerated above that are consistently overlooked in most ordination councils. It impresses upon the candidate, the council members, and the church the required lifetime commitment of the servant of God to the ministry of God. It encourages the candidate, the candidate's pastor, and the ordaining church to be certain he is ready for ordination."^{10}

Instead of scheduling the ordination council only a day or two before the ordination service, schedule it a month in advance. That relieves the inherent pressure of having to approve a candidate who may not be prepared for ordination, simply because the service is already set and everyone invited has already arrived. It also impresses upon the candidate the seriousness of his commitment to the ordination procedure and his responsibility to show himself worthy.

The ordination of men to the gospel ministry is of utmost importance. The church today desperately needs qualified godly men who are willing to persevere through the pressures of ministry in order to provide leadership as we move into the twenty-first century. We in the ministry must now take proper steps to ensure that those future leaders are the men of God that God's Word requires them to be.

Reevaluating the ordination procedure is an integral step in that exciting process.

End Notes
5. I am persuaded that the New Testament teaches that the terms "pastor," "bishop," and "elder" all refer to the same person viewed from different perspectives. Even if a person sees a difference involved, Kent's words are instructive: "Many denominational groups consider the pastor and the elder to be identical. Many who do not and who elect a board of elders consider the pastor to be both a ruling and teaching elder in the congregation. Thus, Scripture passages relating to elders pertain to pastors as well." Homer A. Kent, Jr., The Pastor and His Work (Chicago: Moody Press, 1963), 194, fn. 1.
9. Although I have never seen any discussion of ordination that suggests the procedural approach I advocate here, I was invited to participate in such a council at an Asian American church pastored by one of my former students. It was the most satisfying ordination council of my experience.
10. The concept of licensure, considered in many volumes dealing with pastoral ministry, is beyond the scope of this article. However, the idea of licensing the man to the ministry, and observing his growth in the service of the Lord for a period of time, is one which should be carefully evaluated as a step in the candidate's preparation for ordination.

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A Suggested Ordination Procedure

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00—9:15</td>
<td>Opening prayer and introductions</td>
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<tr>
<td>9:15—10:15</td>
<td>Questions from council member #1 concerning candidate's personal life, salvation, call to ministry, and Baptist distinctives</td>
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<td>10:15—10:30</td>
<td>Additional questions from council members/church deacons</td>
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<td>10:30—10:45</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>10:45—12:00</td>
<td>Questions from council member #2 concerning Old and New Testament Bible content, hermeneutics</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:00—12:15</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>12:15—1:15</td>
<td>Additional questions from council members/church deacons</td>
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<tr>
<td>1:15—2:30</td>
<td>Questions from council member #3 concerning systematic and contemporary theology</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:30—2:45</td>
<td>Additional questions from council members/church deacons</td>
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<tr>
<td>2:45—3:00</td>
<td>Break</td>
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<tr>
<td>3:00—4:00</td>
<td>Questions from council member #4 concerning pastoral ministry</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:00—4:15</td>
<td>Additional questions from council members/church deacons</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:15—4:45</td>
<td>Ordination council/deacons meet to consider recommendation</td>
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<tr>
<td>4:45—5:00</td>
<td>Ordination council reports and closing prayer</td>
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