

ORDINATION AND SCRIPTURE

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The purpose of this paper is to explore call, ordination, and public ministry in gatherings of the people of God as we see them in Scripture. I begin with my caveat about Scripture's value in this kind of pursuit. Next, I highlight two early non-canonical Christian documents that refer to "ordination" and public ministry in language adopted from the culture and continuous into our own time. Finally we look at the less cohesive evidence of the New Testament itself to seek the early roots of this language. This paper can be read without attention to any of the footnotes. I included them to extend an argument, add clarifying evidence, or provide access to interesting language. An appendix provides a short concordance of many of the terms of interest and their occurrence in Scripture. There is also a bibliography for additional reading.

I. Caveat concerning "Use" of Scripture

Lutheran Christians believe that Scripture bears the word of God to us for our awakening, conviction, comfort, and transformation. We therefore love and trust Scripture and tend to seek its guidance for our lives as people seeking to serve God well, even in the 21st century. Yet, such guidance is difficult to come by, for the following familiar reasons:

- The documents we consider Scripture are numerous and varied in type.
- They emerge from equally numerous and varied locations in time and space, many of them not known to us.
- Even the "youngest" of these documents is close to 1900 years old.
- They were written down over a period of time by persons most often unknown to us.
- The process of writing or recording these manuscripts must be understood also to include the editing of the manuscripts from their first appearance until our own day.
- None of these documents was composed in English or any other contemporary language.

As one might imagine from these few descriptions of Scripture, seeking direct and/or practical advice, formulae, or even clear parameters for human behavior (whether individual or corporate) is unlikely to serve us well. What we can do is turn to Scripture for evidence of how our forebears wrestled to live according to God's will and future in their own time and place. By so doing we are able to learn something of what mattered to them, something of how they shaped the patterns of their own realities to witness to and continue the work of God among them. There is a powerful hermeneutic inherent in Scripture itself that includes three points important for us:

1. there are different ways to live together as God's people, different ways to interpret God's will;
2. God the Holy Spirit does not cease to summon us into new and often unsettling ways of being God's people in the world;
3. human beings can not do other than make use of the "neutral technology"¹ of worship, that is of the vocabulary, experiences, language, etc. of life as they know it, to do what is both intelligible and fitting for a godly people. In a word, religious understanding, no matter how profound, is contextual.

These points will help to set an agenda for this brief, summary look at Scripture in regard particularly to call and ordination.

As Scripture in general is varied, so also are scriptural witnesses to experiences and processes of call and ordination. This paper will focus only on the processes of taking a role of public leadership in a Christian community. Footnotes will refer readers to helpful resources on “call,” a very common scriptural word.² Appendices will provide an overview of some of the significant terms in regard to ordination. There are a number of words and actions that could be considered “ordination” in both the Old Testament and the New. Neither Testament, however, lists and defines all forms of community leadership. Nor are the same terms used throughout the texts to describe legitimation for public religious leadership. Especially in the New Testament, our documents are occasional, particular, and local, and often understood to be providing for leadership in the interim before Jesus’ imminent return. We will look at these documents carefully, but I think that the most useful principle to be derived from these materials is the principle that orderly, peaceful, and fruitful life together, including worship, can be carried out by persons who are not “ordained.” The primary concern for those few persons who seem to be “ordained” primarily by the laying on of hands, is careful and correct teaching.

II. Early Non-Canonical Christian Texts

In about 90 C.E. Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians chastising them for their usual fractious behavior. What was not usual in this letter for those whose sense of the history of the Christian movement is shaped only by the canonical New Testament is the explicit argument for the importance of obedience to an ordained leader. While *episcopos* and *presbyter* seem not to be clearly distinguished³ by Clement, each of these refers to an ordained office. Clement develops his argument quite tightly in section 40, To the Corinthians. There he describes the God’s provision of an ordered ministry for “us” to carry out orderly sacrifices/offerings and worship (*prosphoras* and *leitourgias*).⁴ The Levitical laws of the master (*despotes*) that “we ought/are obligated to do in order” are in accord master’s command in Leviticus. Clement makes “us,” his Christian sisters and brothers, the recipients of God’s commands about ministry. By analogy Clement argues that we please God within our own “rank” (*horismenon*).⁵

In section 42, Clement describes a chain of witness and offices. “The apostles were taught the gospel for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus the Christ was sent out by God. Christ there is from God and the apostles are from Christ. Therefore both were in good order from the will of God.” [my translation]. The “first fruits of preaching [apostolic preaching] were the bishops and deacons, tested by the spirit for the mission of the Jesus. He defends the creation of bishops and deacons (*episcopoi kai diakoni*)⁶ as nothing novel, but found in Scripture. (Is LXX 60:17, misquoted).

Clement is interested in order and appointment to ministry. He insists that persons be approved for ministry (*dokimazo ten leitourgian*) ought stay in office if they are serving well, in part because they were appointed “by them,” that is the bishops appointed by the apostles.

Clement represents a significant step in the understanding and justification of a particular office or offices of ministry at a very early date. At about the same time, similar steps were being taken

in Asia Minor, as we know from the letters of Ignatius. Ignatius, self-described as *theophoros*⁷ also wrote a letter to the Romans as he journeyed from Antioch to Rome and martyrdom. Although Ignatius is one of the first to distinguish between the office of *episcopos* and *presbyter*, it is not that distinction that interests us so much as it is his insistence on the necessity of office(s) for the church. These offices and those who fill them are to be understood as appointed by God.⁸ It is worth quoting the salutation to the Philadelphians in part:

...especially if they are at one with the bishop and with the presbyters and deacons with him, who have been appointed in the purpose of Jesus Christ, whom according to his own will he established in strength by his Holy Spirit.⁹

In Philadelphians 1, Ignatius echoes Paul's language from Galatians 1:1 to describe the bishop's appointment. The bishop's ministry did not come from himself (*aph heautou*) or through humans (*di' anthropon*), but from God. While there is plenty of room for debate about the nature of these offices, the distinctions made, the duties attached, and the method of selection, as well as whether the language and concepts of organization are more Greco-Roman or Jewish,¹⁰ there is no doubt that in these sample texts, there is ordination to a public office of ministry akin to that of the Pastorals, from about the same time or earlier.

It is clear that from a very early time (as early as 20 years or so after the death of Paul of Tarsus, and perhaps even before The Pastorals were in circulation¹¹) the office of bishop, the concerns for proper ordination, and the *koinonia* of the church had already been connected in theory and practice. What is not clear is how the understandings of Sts. Clement and Ignatius grew from practices and convictions at which New Testament documents only hint. W. Schoedel reminds us that life had become more complicated for Christian communities by the second century. "Ignatius' letters were written at a time when the diverse achievements of first-century Christianity were beginning to be consolidated and the organizational and theological uncertainties of the second century confronted.¹² In other words, it had begun to look as if the Christians groups were going to be around for a while and would need to figure out how to survive as truly "theophoric" to borrow from Ignatius, apostolic communities. It is important to remember that these groups were a very small and insignificant minority in their own culture and quite without power.

III. New Testament Texts

We go back to the time of Paul's writings. People were organizing around their convictions that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah of the Jewish God but were not yet fully identified as other than Jewish. Two different congregations or gatherings in two different cities may help us better understand Paul's ways, and I emphasize the plural, of thinking with these groups about public ministry. It is wise to keep in mind that our letters from Paul are written to communities already in existence, the organizations of which may well not have been Paul's design.

In Paul's Letter to the Philippians, one is struck immediately by the fact that the Paul specifically greets two groups of persons, the *episkopoi* and the *diakonoi*. It must have been obvious to the recipients of this letter just what those terms meant and to whom they referred. The terms never

come up again in Paul's writings, nor are they connected to any named individuals. Nonetheless we can make several points based on this phrase (Phil 1:2). The plural use of *episkopoi* or overseers in the relatively small city of Philippi tells us that we are far from monarchical episcopate of Clement of Rome. There was not one bishop/overseer in Philippi; there were at least two, perhaps more. So while this term suggests a clear office, the nature of the office is not at all obvious. We do understand that there were any number of "house churches," small groups of believers in Philippi, as well as elsewhere.¹³ Perhaps each had its overseer. The nature of the office, the basis for and process of appointment to it are unknown to us. That *episokopoi* is of necessity so different from our ordinary understanding of bishop suggests that we dare not assume anything about the nature of their "office" nor of that of the presbyters.

It is also useful to note that both *episkopos* and *diakonos* were common terms in the ancient Mediterranean world for a variety of office holders. Philippi was a city with strong ties to Rome, as well as being more Greek than many cities of Asia Minor. It may not be at all surprising to find these kinds of titles in this kind of city, suggesting that local custom was not irrelevant to local organization. These words would have been "natural" or "available" for naming officers in gatherings of many sorts.¹⁴ Their meanings would have varied according to the organization. Such offices do not imply anything like what we think of as "ordination:" they are not usually priestly offices (which would be identified by different vocabulary). Ordination, however, is not precluded. Unfortunately we get no direct information from Paul. Instead we get the names of certain persons who were clearly of high importance among the Philippians, e.g. Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche. We may be able to add Lydia to this list. None of these are identified by a title or office-related descriptor.

In the Pastoral Epistles there is a significant attention to the offices of public ministry. As mentioned above, the dates and authors of I and II Timothy, and Titus are not well established. These letters are early enough to have been somewhat plausibly written by Paul and to be part of our canonical NT. They do offer some significant information about ordination and public ministry. Bishops and deacons are mentioned, although it is not clear which office of these (if any) is held by the addressees of these letters. It is generally agreed that no difference is made between bishops and presbyters in these letters. The descriptions of these offices highlight moral fitness and the ability to wield authority gently and firmly. The duties of these offices center on correct teaching. Such correctness is seen to be of the utmost consequence in the community and for the believers. There is no indication that the duties of bishops, deacons, or widows involve liturgical acts.

It is noteworthy that Timothy is reminded of the "gift that is in you which was given to you through prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders. (I Tim 4:14-15. See also II Tim 1:6)." The laying on of hands can be repeated by Timothy (1 Tim 5:22) and presumably the council of elders (presbyters). To lay on hands, sometimes translated as to ordain, marks persons for public ministry in a number of NT texts. It is sometimes connected with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, but at other times seems to be more an expression of God's own choice and/or the bestowal of God's blessing for certain functions. Laying on of hands was practiced in the Jewish community, its antiquity attested through Jewish Scripture, e.g. Numbers 27:15-23.¹⁵

Laying on of hands is used frequently in Acts to show how some persons were appointed to public ministries of various types. From the seven chosen to serve as deacons to Paul himself whose blindness fell away at the laying on of hands, to the elders chosen in 14:23, the laying on of hands acts as an ordination ritual. It commissions persons for mission activity and it creates leaders whose calling is to manage a community rightly in regard to behavior and what is taught. There is no clear connection between baptism, eucharistic meal, and “ordination.”

There are other ways in the New Testament by which persons name their role and/or the process of acquiring it. Again, the variety is significant. Paul himself never speaks of having been ordained.¹⁶ He does, however, speak of being “set aside.” Paul uses the word *aphorizo*, which is used extensively in the Septuagint, to speak of himself as set aside or set apart for the gospel of God in Romans 1:1, Galatians 1:15. The same word is used in a quotation from the Old Testament in Corinthians 6:17, where, however, it is plural and summons all believers away from the worship of idols. While *aphorizo* has a venerable history of use in reference to being set apart for public office, Paul’s usage seems to have more to do with claiming personal authority or call. He would be well in line with prophetic usages of this word in so describing himself.¹⁷ It is very important to Paul, as to others in Israel’s prophetic tradition, that he does not set himself aside.¹⁸

Paul gives a different glimpse of his public calling among the Gentiles with yet another set of images. In Romans 15:15-19 he uses language of priestly service to make sense of his own role among a people who had heretofore lacked a priest of the covenant.¹⁹ Paul uses language from Jewish religious life to describe about his own calling. He understands himself to be a liturgist (*leitourgos*) of Christ Jesus). His work is that of “serving the gospel of God as a priest” (*ierouounta*).²⁰ His particular task in this priestly service is to render the gentiles as an offering (*prosphora*) well-pleasing/acceptable (*euprosdektos*), made holy (*hegiasmene*) by the holy spirit. This priestly language of worship—which could be found broadly in the religious life of the ancient Mediterranean—reveals to us not Paul the Jewish priest, but Paul reaching for language to conceptualize within a given context, how he was a servant for them.

Because we have no indication that Paul was a priest, we must understand this language as one of his metaphors for his role. It therefore offers us a priceless hermeneutical lens for attending to New Testament writings about what sound like ordained roles to us. Early believers in Jesus seek to express their idea of the community, community leadership, extra-communal leadership, and processes of worship using the language and activities about religion from their world. Robin Lane Fox speaks of the “neutral technology of worship” and by extension of religious organization when he refers to the ways the ancients expressed their relationships with their deity/deities.²¹ It is clear that the New Testament writings express the “office” of public ministry in a variety of ways, depending on local culture and the convictions of the people involved.

New Testament documents come from a very early period. Authors and audiences had not in every case fully identified themselves as other than Jewish or other than pagan. Many persons and groups were convinced that their time on earth would be brief: organization for the future was not central. Ordination for priestly tasks was abundantly present throughout the first century world in both Jewish and pagan contexts. Priests came to their functions in an enormous variety

of ways, as did teachers, prophets, healers, and even saviors. None of these has pre-eminence in the New Testament as a central, original, or general way of organizing and/or finding leaders.

All NT documents witness to us about concerns for the legitimation of leadership. This tells us immediately that no clear guidelines were present. Even those letters from Ignatius and Clement of Rome cited in the beginning of this paper both assume some aspects of leadership and at the same time argue on behalf of an aspect of that leadership.²² What we do see most clearly is that community leaders seem most valued for their ability to continue right teaching that preserves the people from error. This role makes a great deal of sense in a day were few were learned or even literate, where Scripture continued to be the definitive document were understanding the work of God in Jesus the Messiah, where communication was slow and unreliable, and where most converts were adults who had to figure out their faith as they went about their lives.

Christianity from a very early time was concerned to preserve some unity of belief about Jesus and God's way of acting among us, as well as the relationship of God both the Jews and this additional people. Also from a very early time, believers were concerned to work out, without benefit of the codifications and customs of Jewish law, a way of being that would be pleasing to God. All this called for tutored leadership. Because hospitality was of such high importance among early believers, householders had a very important role in early communities. This fact brought the issues of patronage and hierarchy to bear quite quickly.²³ It is as likely as not that householders presided at table in early worship-meals of the community. They may or may not have carried out baptisms; visiting prophets might also have done so. We do not know who did these things and how they were understood. So, ordination, at least as the Pastorals present it and in line with Paul's understanding of his work, has more to do with helping communities to understand their faith properly and to live in accordance with God's will.

We see that the bishop comes to be understood as the chief householder or steward of his people as congregations become more numerous, the interim time before the second coming lengthens, and the distance from that primary experience of Jesus grows. We are not yet at that point in the New Testament. It is not clear exactly how that movement between it and the church fathers took place, but in the Scriptures we see some basic trajectories, as well as the "technology" that was adapted.

Bibliography of Suggested Readings

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Endnotes

1. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 89.
2. Call would be a common word and concept for persons engaged in telling stories of how God communicates with God's creation. How does a distant being get the attention of others? The imagination with which biblical writers convey their conviction of what it is to be contacted, summoned, commanded by God often (though not always) relies on sound across distance, ergo, "call." See any standard concordance and look under: *kaleo* and its synonyms.
3. See J. B. Lightfoot, ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*. Clement, 2 volumes, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 129 n.9.
4. I include the Greek for this reference because of its similarity to Paul's description of his calling in Romans 15:15-17.
5. *Horismenon* is a Greek participle from *horizo*, to determine, appoint, set. It is the word used in Acts 17:31: God judges the world through a man he has appointed; Acts 10:42: the one appointed by God as judge. It describes bishops in I Ephesians 3:2 (Ignatius).
6. Ibid., 44:2.
7. See the first verse of Ignatius' Ephesians. The word means either, borne by God or God bearing. It is not an official title, but could be used in Greek, non-Jewish or Christian circles, to describe a priest, prophet, or religious leader.
8. See Ignatius' letters to the Philadelphians, salutation; Ephesians 6:1; Ephesians 3:2.
9. Have been appointed – *apodeidegmenois*; purpose of Jesus Christ – *en gnome I C*; established-*esterizen*. Compare for similar language, Ephesians 3, which also uses *horisw* for appointed.
10. W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, 17, says the following in his introduction, signaling for us the interconnection of Jewish and other Greco-Roman modes of self-organization. "A major purpose of this commentary is to show the extent to which he had absorbed elements of what may be loosely called popular Hellenistic culture.... Our bishop seems to have absorbed conceptions of communal life from the Hellenistic club and city. And we have seen that it is often hard to distinguish Ignatius' debt to Hellenistic Judaism from his debt to Hellenistic culture itself."
11. Dates given for these letters vary, of course. Much depends on one's convictions about whether or not Paul wrote these letters, thus giving them an early date or not. The range of dates possible extends from 65 – 135 CE.
12. William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch*, The Hermeneia Series, ed. Helmut Koester, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1.
13. As seems likely to be the case also in Corinth. For a brief summary of some of the NT evidence for house churches, as well as abundant and useful footnotes, see John H. P. Reumann, "One Lord, One Faith, One God, but Many House Churches, *Common Life in the Early Church*, ed. Julian V. Hills, (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 106-117.
14. By way of example, *ekklesia* was a word widely used to describe a governing body, not least for a city or town. It, as also *synagoge*, often did not refer to a religious group. This more generic term was chosen to describe early Christian gatherings. At the same time, it is safe to say that the preponderance of groups of

various sorts in the ancient world were in their own larger self-understanding connected to some form of religious expression.

15. See attached pages for concordance to OT uses of laying on of hands. Note also that for the writers of the NT, Scripture meant what we call the OT. There was no NT at the time any of the NT documents were being written!
16. Luke mentions that hands are laid on Paul by Ananias, summoned by God for that specific task. This act seems more a healing of Paul's blindness, at least within the narrative. However, readers and Ananias know that Paul has indeed been chosen by God for public ministry so this might be considered a commissioning rite as well. (Acts 9:15-19). This story seems very akin to the call stories in the Old Testament.
17. See attached word list.
18. See the way in which he speaks scathingly of Peter's having set himself aside in Galatians 2:12.
19. This language also reveals Paul's understanding of the relationship of Gentile believers, God, and covenant life, but that exploration is not immediately germane to this paper's topic.
20. For occurrences of both *ierougeo* and *leitourgos*, see the attached list of important words.
21. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 89. See also Ramsay MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) for an enlightening examination of that pagan "technology" adapted by Christians for their own religious life.
22. E.g. long-term communities, need for organization, acceptance of some hierarchy, definite and differentiated roles for community leaders.
23. Read Philemon for a lovely letter that negotiates overlapping hierarchies as the new community develops.