

Ministerial Ordination: Its Legitimacy and Limitations

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 NKJV

Dear Brethren,

The subject submitted by the Grace Covenant Church of Gilbert, Arizona, and approved at last year's ARBCA General Assembly for the Circular Letter in 2008 was, "Ministerial Ordination: Its Legitimacy and Limitations". They suggested I write the letter, and by common consent the churches agreed, so I do gladly and humbly submit the following for your consideration.

The question of Ministerial Ordination is a vital one. God Himself has given us in His Word the qualifications for a gospel minister. It is outside the scope of this paper to give an exposition of those qualifications outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9 and in other portions of Scripture. However, since God has given to His church the requirements for the ministry, denominations, associations, or even local churches do not have the right to ignore those standards and ordain men who do not adequately meet them. In many circles, and even among Reformed Baptists, the re-discovery of plural eldership has caused some to rush into ordination and minimize Biblical standards in the pursuit of plurality. It has often been with very sad results for the church and the improperly ordained man himself. Others have simply set lower standards for some elders – creating in effect, a two-tiered system in the eldership, which, in reality, is not plurality at all.

Other problems exist in the matter of who should be ordained to the gospel ministry. In many denominations we find a growing trend toward the ordination of women, which is clearly unbiblical. Some groups have begun to ordain practicing homosexuals. One need not even have a church to be ordained, as one can simply go on the internet, and for a fee as small as \$25.00, buy an ordination certificate proclaiming one to be "a reverend", with legal rights (in some states) to perform weddings, etc.. While most evangelical churches would not be in danger of falling to these errors, a trend that hits closer to home is one where the importance of the gospel ministry is minimized and "every member a minister" becomes the cry. While it is true that every child of God should do his utmost to serve our master, it must never be forgotten that God has set some men aside to publicly proclaim His Word and do the work of the ministry.

As Reformed Baptists we do not believe that ordination is a sacrament, or that it elevates the individual to a new or higher status of spirituality. Ordination is the official recognition of the local church that God has called and gifted a man for service in that church. It is the responsibility of each local church to recognize the man or men God has called to serve Him in that particular place. The calling comes first of all from God. Next, it is vital that the man himself has a desire for the ministry. The final vital and necessary step is for the local church to formally recognize the call of God upon the man, and to set him apart for gospel ministry.

A minister is God's good gift to a church and he is to be respected and esteemed by his fellow members (Hebrews 13:7, 17). The church should set as its number one fiscal responsibility the ample financial support of a minister (or ministers in the case of a larger church). "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14). This verse comes in the larger context of ministerial support found in verses 3-18 of the same chapter. Paul tells us faithful ministers should be supported with a generous hand in 1 Timothy 5:17-18.

Ordination practices differ widely between various Baptist groups. The American Baptist Convention has generally followed a model advocated by the nineteenth century Baptist Minister, Francis Wayland, and found in his book, Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches. Regarding the theory that church members are not intelligent enough to choose their own ministers, he writes on page 100:

"Let our churches then, never surrender this authority to single ministers, or to councils, or to any other organization whatsoever. I believe Christ has placed it in their (i.e. the church's) hands, and they have no right to delegate it. Let them use it (the power of recognizing their own minister) in the manner required by the Master, and it can be placed in no safer hands."

However, regarding the formal ordination of ministers, he writes on page 114 of this same work:

"By ordination, a licentiate is admitted *permanently* to the pastoral office, and it is generally understood that he is to make this the great work of his life. *A single church does not ordain. It calls a council, (emphasis mine)* generally representing the churches in the vicinity, who are present by their minister and such private brethren as they may select."

In this view a man can be a pastor of a church, but to be an ordained minister requires recognition outside the body of the local church. A good modern example of this type of practice among Baptists is found in the twenty-nine page document "Ordination within the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee Region". This document is representative of others that can be found among the regions of the American Baptist Convention, and covers in detail the requirements for ordination, within their denomination and is available on the internet at <http://www.abcrgr.org/pdf/ordination.pdf>.

Most Reformed Baptists have followed a model more like that of the Southern Baptist Convention, which can be found on the website <http://sbc.net/aboutus/clministers.asp>.

"Within the Southern Baptist Convention, the licensing and ordination of ministers is a local church matter. There is no denominational ordination service. The list of Southern Baptist ministers is simply a compilation from the reports of the churches. The Southern Baptist convention neither frocks nor defrocks ministers."

Regarding ordination in the Scriptures Hezekiah Harvey notes on page 84 of his book, The Church – It's Polity and Ordinances:

"Three instances of ordination, or the public setting apart to church office, are found in the New Testament—that of "the seven" (Acts 6:6), "whom they set before the apostles, and when they had prayed they laid their hands on them;" that of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:1-3), respecting whom the Holy Ghost said to the ministry at Antioch, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them they sent them away;" and that of Timothy, to whom Paul said (1 Tim. 4:14), "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which

was given thee by prophecy, with the laying of hands of the presbytery.” To these actual cases there is added the injunction given to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:22) “Lay hands suddenly on no man;” where the reference is clearly to ordination; and the natural inference is that the ceremony was customary in setting apart for the ministry.”

ARBCA is an association of churches and not a denomination. ARBCA does not provide a mechanism for the ordination of ministers. We believe it is the responsibility of each local church to recognize and install her individual elders. However, there is an aspect regarding the ordination of ministers that does concern each and every ARBCA church. The ARBCA churches need to realize that it is their responsibility to take the Confession seriously and only ordain those men who meet the standards of “Full Subscription” to the 1689 London Baptist Confession. Each year, the ARBCA Churches pledge to one another their heart-felt belief in a Full Subscription position regarding the 1689 Confession (a definition of “Full Subscription” can be found as Appendix #1 to the ARBCA Constitution).

All conservative Christians claim “the Bible alone” as their final authority of faith and practice, yet, it is interesting how diverse these various groups can be on vital doctrinal issues. The 1689 Confession is the glue that holds our Association together. Our churches are not identical to one another, each local church has its own personality. We can find many different personality types among our Association churches. We are not attempting to be cookie-cutters by any stretch of the imagination. Practices vary among the churches, and some Reformed Baptist individuals may find themselves more comfortable in one local church than another. But, there should be no significant doctrinal differences between subscribing churches. It is the duty of the ministers in ARBCA churches to personally hold and publicly teach the Confession as the theological framework of our faith.

In the context of the local church, a pastor must be “among his people”. His life must be an open book and he is to be well-known to his people, as they are the ones who must recognize his call. There is no way a church can judge a man’s qualifications according to 1 Timothy 3:1-7 or Titus 1:5-9 unless they know him well. These are the Scriptural qualification for ordination, and while churches are free to add other restrictions, such as educational requirements, a church has no Biblical right to ordain men for the ministry who do not meet these Biblical credentials. Remember, a minister at one church will be respected as a legitimate minister by sister churches, and even in the community at large. He represents Jesus Christ the Lord, so there is a great responsibility to ordain only qualified men.

A man, who is the pastor of a church, must be a member of that same church. Each Christian has the responsibility, if possible, to join himself to a local church, and that includes a minister. His pastoral authority extends only to that church. A man cannot be a member of two churches at one time, nor can he be the pastor of two distinct congregations at any one time. He may be commissioned by his local church, for a time, to do work in another field, but he remains under the authority of and answerable to the local church to which he is a formal part. A man, who is ordained to the eldership of a church, should remain a minister in that church until his death, or he voluntarily resigns to relocate, or he resigns for personal/biblical reasons. Of course, a man may disqualify himself from the ministry, in which case the church must take action to remove such a man from the eldership through the proper application of church discipline. When a man resigns from the ministry, or is properly removed, he is no longer an ordained minister. It should be recognized that a man is not a pastor, unless he is currently a pastor of a church. There is no pastoral authority that extends outside that of the local church. A man may have a certificate of ordination, he may have good theological training, he may be very qualified for the ministry, but

he is not “in the ministry” unless he is called to such by a local body of believers. A man may be highly regarded as a former pastor, a man may be a pastoral candidate, but a man is not a pastor unless he is recognized as such and set apart by a local congregation. A shepherd must have sheep. A pastor must have a congregation. It would be ridiculous for a man to call himself a husband when he was not married. No man has the authority to declare himself to be a minister. The calling comes from God and is recognized through the local church.

There are practical and ethical issues involved for a man who once was a pastor and now finds himself without a church. In our circles, men have often had to leave positions in their former churches or denominations because of doctrinal convictions. There is nothing wrong with a man, in this position, to make inquiries to local churches regarding openings in their pulpit ministry. He should study to be a good church member until such a time as God would open the door of pastoral ministry once again. A man in this position may find it the wisest course to take a season of training, either formally through a Seminary, or informally, by serving as a member in a good local church before re-entering the ministry. This is especially true, if he has been trained in another tradition.

A man who was once a pastor and now finds himself without a formal ministry must be very careful to avoid common pitfalls that would be damaging to the church to which he is now a member. The people of the congregation will usually have a special regard for this man, because of his knowledge, training and experience. There is a certain way experienced men in ministry often carry themselves, and a man could easily draw people to himself, and begin to function as a pastor, without the proper calling. He should exercise great care to show proper regard to the current pastors of the congregation, and not undermine their authority, even if he at times, finds he disagrees with them. If he has the desire to come into the eldership of that body, he must work closely with the existing eldership. This may call for great humility on his part, for he may find he has more experience in ministry than the existing eldership. It will likely call for patience on his part too. He must remember the authority rests in the local church, and it is the local church’s responsibility to assess the situation, and plot the course of re-entry to the ministry through that church (or possibly a church planting endeavor). The man should gladly take up opportunities for ministry as the occasions present themselves. He should always be pointing to the God-ordained leaders and work with them in whatever roles they are pleased to entrust to him.

The eldership has a responsibility toward the man who once served as a pastor, especially if he has expressed his desire to return to the ministry once again. They should meet regularly with him, and give him specific goals to achieve to help him toward a return. If God has called the man, God will make a way for the man to be useful in that local church, or elsewhere. The eldership may look for opportunities to place the man in a new location, as a church-planter, or to recommend him to fill a vacant pulpit in an existing church. The eldership may give the man preaching or teaching opportunities to test his giftedness and test the congregation’s reception of the man. However, the man should never use these opportunities to go against the established eldership or use his former position to seek to change the direction of the church on his own initiative. All things must be done decently and in order.

The church members have a responsibility toward the man who once served as a pastor. They are to treat him with Christian kindness and respect. They can regard him as a mature Christian without regarding him as their pastor. The church members individually must not treat him as their pastor. The church should not rush the man into service, nor unnecessarily delay his return to ministry. They should treat the man, and his family, as one of their own, and seek to be

“members of one another” with him in their covenant responsibilities. If, in God’s providence, the man is raised up to the eldership of that congregation, or sent with the blessing of that church to another field of labor, the church itself will be able to speak with a unified voice regarding the qualifications of the man that they came to know as a fellow member while he was among them.

An interesting question regarding a man who was an ordained minister, and now comes back into the eldership of a local congregation is; should he be “re-ordained”? This would be at the discretion of the individual church. One would not expect a full ordination council under these circumstances, and many Reformed Baptist churches do not carry on the practice of “ordination councils” in any circumstance. Certainly, such councils are not mandated by Scripture. An installation service would be the normal way of bringing a man into the eldership, whether he were a former elder or not. A typical installation/ordination service may look something like this:

The local church would inform those churches close to her in proximity and doctrine that they have set a date to call Mr. _____ to their eldership. They may ask for representatives from the churches to attend the special service of setting him aside to ministry. Generally, a charge would be given to the man, and a charge given to the church. Then, formal ordination vows should be taken by the man, publicly, to remind him and the congregation of the solemnity of the occasion.

An example of vows that could be given at an Ordination would be as follows:

Candidate, please answer the following questions either yes or no.

1. Do you believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as originally given, to be the inerrant Word of God, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice?
2. Do you sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith of this church, The London Baptist Confession of 1689, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures?
3. Do you further promise that if at any time you find yourself out of accord with any of the fundamentals of this system of doctrine, you will, on your own initiative, make this change known to the elders and the church body, and voluntarily submit your resignation from the pastoral office?

If all answers of the candidate are affirmative, continue:

To the Congregation: Please listen to this question and answer AMEN if you agree:

Do you, the members of _____ Church, acknowledge and receive _____ as a minister of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, called to preach the gospel, shepherd the people of God, and administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as a representative of this church? If so, please answer AMEN.

The above is merely given as a guide and can be expanded at the pleasure of the church.

Another question to address is: how much education should a man have before being ordained to the gospel ministry? In reality, this may differ from church to church, according to the maturity of the body in that particular location. Biblically, he must be “apt to teach” and “not a novice” (1 Timothy 3:2, 6). He must “hold fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). If a man does not meet these qualifications, he should not be ordained.

The ARBCA churches have set a goal to have the very best trained ministry possible. This is why IRBS exists, and why it is worth the effort and expense to keep it functioning, to facilitate the training of men for the gospel ministry. The fact that the need is great should not cause young men to rush into the ministry. The woodsman never loses time by stopping to sharpen his axe. A young man who believes he is called to spend his life in ministry should be encouraged to attend a four year college or University, so he can become a better-rounded individual. He should receive at least a bachelor's degree, which would also give him a better resume if he finds he needs to engage in "tent-making" during the course of his ministry. From college, he would attend seminary, and earn his M.Div. Following this model would lead to a more educated ministry, and as our movement matures, we would hope this to become the normal pattern.

What should a church do if, in God's providence, she no longer has a pastor? Maybe no better advice exists than that found in the appendix to the Charleston Confession (which is basically the 1677/89 London Baptist Confession with an extra chapter, devoted to Psalm and Hymn singing) as adopted in 1774. We read the following in A Summary of Church Discipline:

"A church having no minister should look among its own members and see if there be any who seem to have promising gifts and graces for that great work. If such a one is found, he is to be put on private trial for a season; when on finding him promising, and that they are edified by his preaching, they may call him to preach in public. After which, if it should appear that his rod, like *Aaron's*, buds, blossoms, and bears fruit, he is to be set apart by ordination, that he may perform every part of the sacred function, *Acts 13:2, 3*. But, should no such person be found in the church, it is the duty of a sister church, if possible, to supply them. And if a person, who is a member of another church be approved, and be inclined to accept a call from them, he must first become a member with them, so that they may choose him from among themselves, *see Acts 1:21*."

The matter of "Ministerial Ordination: Its Legitimacy and Limitations" is answered by two vital principles. First, a local church must make it their primary concern to ordain only men called by God – but they must conversely take care that they do not neglect to recognize and ordain the man/men God has called to the ministry that are already in their midst. Churches must always be "looking out among themselves" for those God has chosen. Finally, a gospel minister's authority comes through the local church, and is limited to the local church of which he is a member.

LBCF 26:7, "To each of these churches, thus gathered, according to His mind declared in His Word, He hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which He hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exercising, and executing of that power."

Yours in Christ,
 Pastor Steve Marquedant
 Sovereign Grace Reformed Baptist Church
 Ontario, California