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The
ORDINATION
of **BAPTIST**
MINISTERS

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The Ordination of Baptist Ministers

A paper prepared jointly by the faculties of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

WHAT GUIDANCE does the New Testament offer in the important matter of setting men apart for the Christian ministry? Believing that principles and ideals for the guidance of churches are available in the Scriptures, the compilers of this booklet have sought to coordinate the various Bible references to ordination and to interpret them in the light of contemporary conditions and requirements.

Accordingly, the following topics are discussed:

- The New Testament justification for ordination
- The significance of ordination
- Prerequisites to ordination
- Authority and responsibility in ordination
- Procedures in ordination
- Means of safeguarding ordination

I. JUSTIFICATION FOR ORDINATION

There is surprisingly little said in the New Testament about ordination. The word used by Jesus in Mark

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3:14, "and he *ordained* twelve," is translated *appointed* in the American Standard Version, the Greek being from the word meaning to *make*. When Jesus said in John 15:16, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and *ordained* you," he used a word meaning to *put, place, set*, and again the ASV translated it *appointed*. Paul used this word when he spoke of himself as having been "ordained a preacher" (1 Tim. 2: 7). The word *ordained* is avoided in the ASV in favor of *appointed* in Acts 14:23 concerning the "ordaining" of elders by Paul and Barnabas on their return visit to the churches during the first missionary journey. The Greek word here used means "to elect by stretching out the hand."

The view of ordination as a sacrament was of relatively late date, there being no hint of any such significance in appointment to the gospel ministry during the first century of the Christian church.

Baptists believe in a personal, divine call to the Christian ministry. They have historically insisted on a procedure of ordination or setting apart of those who have thus felt called in a way that recognizes the validity of that call and at the same time that indicates its confirmation by the local church. Such ordination is in accordance with the New Testament conception of setting apart and carries with it no sacramental meaning or authority whatever.

In this connection attention should be given to Jesus' selection and special appointment of the twelve who

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were thus "set apart" from other disciples. The ceremony of "laying on of hands," first mentioned in connection with the appointment of the seven helpers, or deacons (Acts 6:6), had become a well recognized custom before the close of the New Testament era (see Acts 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6). No formal description of an ordination service is given in the New Testament, but there is ample warrant for a simple ceremony in setting apart those who have proved themselves to be called of God into the Christian ministry.

II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ORDINATION

When a church recognizes and endorses God's call of one of its members to be a minister of the gospel it experiences a *crowning development* of its own service for the Lord. It brings to fulfilment the following factors in its spiritual life:

Prayer that the Lord of the harvest send forth laborers into his harvest (*cf* Luke 10:2);

Teaching concerning the world's need of the gospel (*cf* Rom. 10:13-15);

Dedication of self and means to the spread of the gospel (*cf* Acts 13:1-3; 3 John 5-8).

When worthily bestowed, this recognition brings to a church the joy of realizing that it has been a means in the hands of God for sowing seeds of truth whose fruitage is "a man of God." If no such fruit appears in a church, its prayer life, its teaching, and its dedication have yet to produce their best.

This recognition is also *a solemn responsibility*. It lays upon a church an obligation so to exercise its recognition as to make it to be all of the following:

A judgment of the candidate's conviction concerning his call (*cf* 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9);

A sanction of the candidate's fitness to undertake the duties of a pastor (*cf* Luke 24:44-49; 2 Tim. 2:1-2);

A partnership in the future ministry of the candidate (*cf* 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6).

When this recognition is in deed and truth what it professes to be it constitutes a judgment of the correctness of the candidate's conviction concerning his call.

Ordination, moreover, serves as an endorsement in the eyes of the state of a minister's qualification to function in its behalf. Legal provisions whereby ordained ministers act under authority from the state (as well as under divine authority) in the performance of marriage ceremonies, or serve as chaplains and the like, emphasize the importance of a church's action in ordaining any man to the ministry. Separation of church and state creates a situation in this case wherein two independent authorities are involved. Each must needs justify the respect of the other by a discharge of its duties that fulfils rightful expectations.

III. PREREQUISITES TO ORDINATION

Paul's injunction to "lay hands hastily on no man" (2 Tim. 5:22) is sufficient warrant for a period of

probation between the time of special call to the ministry and ordination. From time immemorial Baptist churches have "licensed" or "liberated" men before they were willing to confer upon them the solemn entrustment of ordination. There is protection for the minister as well as for the churches in this wise practice. Rarely should a man be ordained who has not had such a testing time.

Essential qualifications of the minister to be ordained should include at least the following:

A genuine conversion experience;

A vital and growing Christian faith;

High moral character;

Adequate and appropriate testimony to the conviction that he has been called to enter the ministry;

Satisfactory previous experience in Christian service;

Membership in a Baptist church, preferably in the church considering his ordination;

Adequate education in the background and work of the ministry;

Approval of responsible Christians who have known the candidate over a period of time;

Election or appointment to a definite work, except in unusual circumstances.

Ordination is the setting apart of an approved brother, convinced of his call of God to the gospel ministry,

after which he may, with full consent of the church, devote himself in such fields of worthy Christian ministry as he may be led.

IV. AUTHORITY AND RESPONSIBILITY IN ORDINATION

Obviously ordination is not a private matter. It is an occasion for a church to magnify its interdependence. Ordination is once for all, and a man so commended is thereby recommended to any Baptist body anywhere which may desire his services.

Counsel with the brotherhood is obviously needed before the decision of the church is made. This is the justification and purpose of an *advisory council*. The only function of such a council among Baptists is to make inquiry and give consequent advice. If its findings are received by the initiating church too late to be heeded, or are regarded by that church as the action of an official board that has power to ratify or refuse, then its purpose is vitiated. Only as an advisory body does it fit into the polity of New Testament churches. In this sense a council and a presbytery are to Baptists the same thing, and either name may be used.

Only "presbyters" or "elders" constituted the council in the ordination of ministers according to the New Testament records. Whether these presbyters were themselves ordained pastors is not made clear. Possibly they were. Sometimes there were several "elders" in one church, some of whom were evidently evangelists

and teachers. Philip, the preaching deacon, performed the ordinance of baptism (Acts 8:36-39). Barnabas was one of the "prophets and teachers" at Antioch (Acts 13:1). Those who were known in the New Testament churches variously as "prophets," "evangelists," "elders," "teachers," and "deacons" are distinguished in our churches simply as pastors and deacons. It seems quite likely that deacons now perform functions once fulfilled by elders who were not pastors. Since it is a local church which ordains, and the typical Baptist church today has only one pastor, it would seem advisable that the church be represented by more than one man in a matter of such great importance. It would seem well within the authority of the church to appoint one or more of its deacons to act with the pastor should it so desire.

The composition of an ordaining council should be such as to command the confidence and esteem of the brotherhood. Remembering that the only authority an ordaining council has among Baptists is the right to recommend, painstaking care should be taken to see that the character and number of its members are such as to commend its judgment to Baptists generally. The members of the council should represent as large number of churches as practicable. The sending of invitations to all sister churches within the association, asking them to name messengers, is a wise policy. Care should be taken by the ordaining church to see that there are included among its messengers some prepared to give

first-hand information concerning the life, work, reputation, preaching, and effectiveness of the candidate.

Churches wishing advice concerning the convening and composition of an ordaining council might fittingly seek it from local pastors or denominational leaders. In this connection, it is suggested that associations may appoint a committee from time to time with the moderator of the association as chairman and the associational missionary as key member, to study these matters, gather information concerning the practice of the churches, and stand ready to give such advice as the churches might seek.

The time appointed for the examination of the prospective minister should be set far enough ahead to permit the home church to gather all necessary information. A day and hour should be picked which is known to be suitable for the messengers from other churches. Opportunity should be left open for the council to question the candidate at such length as it may think necessary.

No announcement should be made concerning the ordination service until after the report of the examination is received. Previous announcement might embarrass the council in case it sees fit to recommend against ordination or the postponement of action.

As a rule, the initiative in calling a council to examine a candidate for the ministry should be taken by the church of which the candidate is a member. In case

another church should desire that the candidate become its pastor that church should appeal to the home church to take this initiative. This procedure recognizes the right and responsibility of the home church to exercise watch care over its members. In case it has not held the membership of the candidate long enough to have the desired information, it should delay consideration long enough to obtain it from other sources, which should include his business and school associates. The home church should realize that its call for an examining council is a step which amounts to a provisional recommendation. If it is not convinced that the ordination is advisable it ought to dissuade the candidate from seeking it. Where the candidate has not been licensed to preach previous to the request for ordination, the advisability of licensing as a first step should be impressed upon the candidate.

After ordination there continues to rest upon the ordaining church a responsibility for helping the minister maintain his fitness to serve. He needs certainly to be supported with prayer, maybe with material aid and direction toward better preparation, and if necessary with the same corrective discipline exercised over other members. In case his membership is moved to another church the ordaining church will do well to send with his church letter an explanation of his ordination and a request to the church receiving him that it shall henceforth accept responsibility for spiritual watch care over his ministry.

If an ordained minister is found unworthy of his office, the church holding his membership is likewise responsible for his examination and discipline. It will do well to call together a council, as at the time of ordination, to advise concerning necessary action; but in any case the church where he holds membership is responsible for taking the initiative and for final decision. Should the man refuse to discontinue his functions as a minister of the gospel, after his lack of fitness is fully determined, then the rightful procedure is that of public statement to the brotherhood, thereby withdrawing the recommendation given by ordination. In case of heresy or serious moral lapse, this withdrawal of the man's credentials should be made effective to prevent the continuation of his activities.

V. PROCEDURES IN ORDINATION

The Ordination Council.—When a church sees fit to call an advisory council, it should make the call an official act of the church, instructing its clerk to invite sister churches to send messengers. The reason for the call and the time and place of meeting should be stated. When convened, the messengers from the home church should be prepared to furnish all relevant information. Then the council should be left to conduct its business in its own way as an independent body.

After receiving the statement of the home church, the advisory council should first of all proceed to organize itself. At least a chairman and a secretary are needed,

the latter to make a record of the proceedings and act otherwise under the council's instruction. The chairman may lead the examination himself, asking other members to participate as they see fit, or he may appoint other members to lead various parts of the examination. The recommended procedures would then be somewhat as follows:

1. Review of recommendation of the church proposing the ordination.
2. Receiving of statement from the candidate giving his reasons for desiring ordination and stating his conviction concerning his call and fitness. Preferably, the statement should be carefully written beforehand.
3. A systematic but searching examination into the candidate's Christian experience; record of previous Christian service; qualities of Christian character; proof of divine call; doctrinal and ethical views; knowledge of the Bible and Baptist history and practice; acquaintance with contemporary thought and affairs; skills in preaching, teaching, and pastoral ministries; attitudes toward the church, the denomination, and the kingdom of God; evangelistic and missionary commitment; theories and practice of stewardship; understanding and appreciation of the sacredness of the office of minister, with its obligation to moral and spiritual integrity.

4. A period of prayer and discussion leading up to a decision recommending either (a) ordination, or (b) deferment for a stated period, or (c) rejection of the application.
5. The secretary should deliver a written notice concerning the council's findings to the church calling the council with a minimum of delay.

The Ordination Service.—The presbytery having completed its work and made its recommendation, a formal service of ordination should then be held by the church calling the council.

The first part of the service of ordination should be the reading and acceptance by the church of the recommendation from the advisory council. It must be remembered always that authority in these matters lies with the church. Such an occasion is an excellent opportunity for training a church to discharge properly its responsibility in these matters.

A service of ordination will then usually follow the following pattern:

An ordination sermon;

A charge to the candidate, like that of Paul to Timothy (2 Tim. 4:1-5). This may be accompanied by a charge to the church which he is to serve in case representatives of that church are present. This part of the service may be fittingly concluded by the presentation of a Bible to the ordained as a memorial of the occasion.

An ordaining prayer. Ministers, deacons, and others appointed by the church to represent it encircle the candidate in view of the congregation, and the presiding officer offers an explanation concerning the laying on of hands which is to follow, emphasizing its symbolic nature and our reliance upon the Holy Spirit solely to give meaning to it. The remaining parts of the service may follow the ordination prayer without further announcement. Laying on of hands according to the custom mentioned in 1 Timothy 4:14.

Extension of the hand of fellowship by the congregation. If circumstances are not propitious for the coming of the whole congregation, invitation may be given to those who will act representatively, either at this point in the service or after the benediction.

Benediction. It is appropriate that the newly-ordained minister be asked to pronounce this benediction.

VI. SAFEGUARDING ORDINATION

The number of ordained men not actually engaged in the ministry, the alarming frequency of changes of fields, the poor development and lack of enlistment of a multitude of churches and church members, the tragedy of broken church fellowship which often stems from difficulties that gather about the minister, the unseemly "candidating" which all too often occurs when a church

seeks a pastor are evidences of need for greater care in ordination. Serious consideration might well be given to the following suggestions for meeting this need:

Insistence upon a period of licensure or probation in practically every case;

A presbytery or examining council more representative of the churches of an association;

More stress on the need for proof that the candidate's call is from God;

Careful study of the candidate's written statement upon which he bases the request for examination and ordination;

A presbytery that functions in the examination of the candidate with proper dignity and application to the task in hand;

More regard to the would-be minister's equipment for the work of preacher, teacher, soul-winner, cooperative worker, with careful inquiry as to personal character and doctrinal soundness;

Ordination, as a rule, after a call to a definite work;

Greater sense of responsibility on the part of the district association and the state convention, with possible standing committees from each at the service of the churches upon request;

More careful and prayerful methods according to which pastor and church are brought together, in line with the principle of the complete independ-

ence of the churches, the rule being that only one prospective pastor at a time be considered; More instruction of the churches generally as to their responsibility for exercising utmost care in ordination of ministers; as to the procedures to be followed in the implementing of New Testament teachings and accepted Baptist practice in this matter; and as to the relationships between pastor and people, both in the matter of appointments to the ministry and subsequent mutual responsibilities.