

# Ordination

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*by Robert Voss*

I, by virtue of my office, as a called and ordained servant of the Word, announce the grace of God unto all of you, and in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

The joy of publicly proclaiming peace and pronouncing the absolution is a privilege conferred by the call. Ministers of Christ are not self appointed. They don't just take this honor upon themselves. A fundamental principle with respect to the call to administer the keys publicly is the necessity of it. The Augsburg Confession, Article XIV, underscores this necessity of the call. "No one should publicly teach in the church or administer the sacraments unless he be regularly called" (Triglotta, p. 49). Luther testified to this necessity of a call, stating, "I dare not preach without a call" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 23, p. 277). St. Paul asked, "How shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Romans 10:15), and he reminded the elders of Ephesus, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). And to the Ephesians the apostle wrote, "He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12). To have a call without God's Word is not enough, and to have God's Word without a call is not enough. The call is essential for the ministry. Without it there could be no public ministry. A prerequisite, then, for the public ministry is the valid and legitimate call.

The words of absolution stated above might seem to indicate that an ordination also is a prerequisite for the public ministry. Is that true? Is ordination a rite prescribed by or commanded in the Scriptures? Does ordination make one eligible to perform the functions of the public ministry? These and related questions hopefully will be answered as we take up the subject of ordination, considering:

1. Its Origin
2. Its Essence
3. Its Purpose
4. Its Practice

## 1. Its Origin

The Lutheran Confessions encourage the ordination of suitable persons to preach, teach, baptize, administer the Lord's Supper, or perform any work or office of the church. Referring to those "who discharge these functions, having been called to do so," the Smalcald Articles, Part III, On Ordination and the Call, *Concordia Triglotta*, page 497, state: "Therefore, as the ancient *examples* of the Church and the Fathers teach us, we ourselves will, and ought to, ordain suitable persons to this office." We are encouraged to follow the ancient examples of the church.

The imposition of hands, which is a feature of ordination, was a part of the ceremonial worship of God's Old Testament people. "And he shall put forth his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Leviticus 1:4). The imposition of hands was prescribed in the law of burnt offerings and in the law of peace offerings. "He shall lay his hand upon the head of his offering, and kill it at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation" (Leviticus 3:2). The imposition of hands upon the offerings of God's people was practiced by the sons of Aaron. "And he brought the bullock for the sin offering; and Aaron and his sons laid their hands upon the head of the bullock for the sin offering" (Leviticus 8:14).

The imposition of hands also was a feature of the blessing which Jacob pronounced upon the sons of Joseph.

And Joseph said unto his father, they are my sons whom God hath given me in this place. And he said, bring them, I pray thee, unto me and I will bless them... And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it upon Ephraim's head, who was the younger, and his left hand upon Manasseh's head, guiding his hands wittingly; for Manasseh was the firstborn... And he blessed them that day, saying, In thee shall Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh: and he set Ephraim before Manasseh. (Gen. 48:9,14,20)

When God chose Joshua to succeed Moses as the leader of his people, we are told,

And the Lord said unto Moses, Take thee Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay thine hand upon him; and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation; and give him a charge in their sight. And thou shalt put some of thine honour upon him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient...and at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation. And Moses did as the Lord commanded him: and he took Joshua, and set him before Eleazar the priest, and before all the congregation: And he laid his hands upon him, and gave him a charge, as the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses. (Numbers 27:18-23)

Thus it appears that in the Levitical worship of God, in pronouncing God's special blessing, and in choosing and formally appointing a leader of God's people, the imposition or laying on of hands was a special feature. It appears that the imposition of hands was an Old Testament custom that was practiced in conferring upon one the office of the public ministry. Nowhere, however, can we find that this rite was prescribed as the essence of the Old Testament ministry.

The imposition of hands also was performed as a symbolic act in the New Testament church. Jesus used it to convey special blessings. "He put his hands upon him" (the blind man of Bethsaida) and healed him (Mark 3:25). Again, Jesus "put his hands upon them (the little children), and blessed them" (Mark 10:16). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul reminded the young pastor to "neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" ( 1 Timothy 4:14 ). Referring to the elders of the church, Paul again referred to the imposition of hands when he wrote to Timothy, "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Timothy 5:22). Furthermore, admonishing Timothy to stir up the gift of

God in him, Paul wrote, “Wherefore I put thee in remembrance that thou stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6).

Moreover, this ancient custom was practiced also as the early Christian church grew and chose helpers for the apostles. “And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parnenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:56).

The imposition of hands was practiced also by the apostles Peter and John as they bestowed through the power of God the special gift of the Holy Ghost upon the Christians at Samaria.

Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God. They sent unto them Peter and John: Who, when they were come down, prayed for them, That they might receive the Holy Ghost: (For as yet he was fallen upon none of them: only they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.) Then laid they their hands, on them, and they received the Holy Ghost. (Acts 8:14-17)

With these examples, then, we see that the laying on of hands is mentioned both in the Old and the New Testament. While it is frequently mentioned, nowhere can we find that it is mandated as the essence of ordination for the public ministry. Following the ancient examples of the church, we may ordain suitable persons for the office of the ministry and include the laying on of hands as a feature of that rite, but nowhere in God’s Word, that we can find, are we commanded to do so.

The second part of this paper deals with the essence of ordination as we know it today, and in describing its essence we shall see first what it is not and then what it is.

## **2. Its Essence**

Since the imposition of hands, also in connection with the public ministry, is mentioned in the Scriptures but is not commanded, we observe it as an ecclesiastical rite but not as an institution of God. Hence it is not a sacrament ordained of God by which his grace is imparted to men. In Article XIII, Of the Number and Use of the Sacraments, in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, it is stated,

But if ordination be understood as applying to the ministry of the Word, we are not unwilling to call ordination a sacrament. For the ministry of the Word has God’s command and glorious promise... If ordination be understood in this way, neither will we refuse to call the imposition of hands a sacrament. For the Church has the command to appoint ministers...because we know that God approves this ministry, and is present in the ministry (that God will preach and work through men and those who have been chosen by men). And it is of advantage, so far as can be done, to adorn the ministry of the Word with every kind of praise against fanatical men, who dream that the Holy Ghost is given not through the Word, but because of certain preparations of their own, if they sit unoccupied and silent in obscure places, waiting for illumination, as the Enthusiasts taught, and the Anabaptists now teach.

This article states that under certain conditions and circumstances ordination may be called a sacrament, but it is not ordinarily regarded as a sacrament according to the Lutheran understanding of that term. Ordination itself does not offer the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Ordination itself does not impart grace; that grace is imparted through the means that are used publicly by those who are ordained.

Neither does the rite of ordination impress upon the ordained an indelible character. Roman Catholicism teaches that ordination is a sacrament by which grace is conferred and by which a character is implanted that can not be effaced, *a character indelebiles*, which makes the ordained a priest for all time and by which he receives supernatural power to transubstantiate the bread and wine in the Holy Supper. There is nothing in the Scriptures, however, which would indicate that ordination, or that a feature of it called the laying on of hands, makes a man a minister.

Dr. John T. Mueller, in *Christian Dogmatics*, underscores the fact that “the Confessional Lutheran Church does not practice so-called absolute ordination, ordination of a person who as yet has received no call, since this might create wrong impressions as though by the ordination the ordained is received into a spiritual estate, who is eligible for a call by a congregation just because of special virtues conferred by the ordination.” It is this danger of looking upon ordination as a rite by which some special powers are bestowed, such as the power of transubstantiation which the church does not possess, powers by which a man is made a minister, that make it inadvisable to overemphasize the value or benefits of ordination. Neither should an overemphasis be placed upon the words, “I, as a called and *ordained* servant of the Word,” so that ordination is not regarded as something essentially necessary in order for one to be empowered to speak the absolution.

Overemphasis is placed upon ordination not only by the Romans. The Episcopal Church teaches that ordination is the only means by which the apostolic succession, and with it the true ministry, can be transmitted.

What, then, essentially is ordination? Luther stated (St. Louis, XVII, 114), “The laying on of hands (ordination) blesses, confirms, and attests this (the call to the office) just as a notary and witnesses attest a worldly matter and as a pastor, when he blesses a bridegroom and bride, confirms or attests their marriage, that is, that they before took each other and publicly announced it.”

Our own Processors Schuetze and Habeck (in *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 49) state,

The rite of ordination confers the pastoral office on an individual no more than does the rite of installation. The call, not ordination, does this. We view the ordination and every installation as a public recognition or confirmation of the validity and legitimacy of the call sent and accepted. Hence no ordination should be performed without a preceding call. Avoid any practice that may leave the impression that ordination confers *a character indelebiles*.

Dr. J.H.C. Fritz, in the *Concordia Monthly*, Volume 13, Number 10, October 1932, p. 727, in tracing the origin of the laying on of hands through the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures and in describing it as a mere custom and a symbolic act which is not administered by divine institution, quotes Hollaz, defining ordination “as a formal act by which a person is declared examined and legitimately called, separated from worldly occupations, and

entrusted with a certain office with hands, imposition and prayer.” He also quotes Chemnitz, who describes ordination as a “declaration and public ratification of a call,” and Baldwin, who describes it as “ratification of a call, which is not absolutely necessary.”

Returning to Article X, Part 3, of the Smalcald Articles, we note that ordination is applied to those who discharge the functions of the public ministry, “having been called to do so.” That it is a confirmation of the call is evident also in the Smalcald Articles, *Triglotta*, p. 525,70:

From all these things it is clear that the Church retains the right to elect and ordain ministers...and this also a most common custom of the Church testifies. For formerly the people elected pastors and bishops. Then came a bishop, either of that church or a neighboring one, who *confirmed the one elected* by the laying on of hands.

So also Dr. Adolf Hoenecke stated (*Ev. Luth. Dogmatik*, Band IV, p. 189, Lehrsatz III), “Die Ordination macht niemand zum Pastor, sondern bestätigt nur einen Pastor als rechtmäßig berufenen Pastor.”

All of this surely testifies that the call of a congregation or of another calling body and the acceptance of this call makes a person a pastor or minister. Because of what that call entails, and because the rite of ordination includes the use of the Word and implores the blessing of God in prayer, we may say that ordination carries with it, even though it may be but a formal attestation and public ratification of a call that has been accepted, divine blessings. The rite includes the Word and prayer and the ceremonial laying on of hands. Ordination calls upon the ordinant to assume publicly the obligation of faithfulness to the Scriptures and subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. It calls forth the promise of faithfulness also to the office of the ministry. Thus the ministry of the keys is involved in ordination because the call is confirmed, but again, the power of the keys is not given by ordination. The difference between laymen and clergymen is not order but office, and that office of the ministry, of course, may be divided into or cover many different areas of work.

Ordination has its validity in the validity of the call, in the proper acceptance of the same, and in the order and decency which God prescribes for his church. Again, its validity is not in any form of apostolic succession that it is purported by some to confer.

Ordination, then, is an ecclesiastical rite which essentially is no different than installation. It is a rite which is practiced but not commanded. It is a custom which is of long standing in the Christian church.

### **3. Its Purpose**

In describing the essence of ordination, we have already gotten into its purpose. We have already stated that its basic purpose is to give public recognition or confirmation to the validity and legitimacy of the call sent and accepted. Professors Habeck and Schuetze indicate that Schaller and Walther listed these basic purposes: 1) to give public testimony of the pastor’s fitness for office, 2) to give public recognition of the call for reassurance of both pastor and congregation, 3) to offer intercession for the ministry by the entire congregation, and 4) (added by Schaller) to give public confession to pure doctrine and the promise of faithfulness. Thus ordination serves valuable purposes, confirming both the ordinant and those whom he will serve.

By the rite of ordination the ministry is adorned. As the Apology states, Article XIII, “And it is of advantage, so far as can be done, to adorn the ministry of the Word with every kind

of praise against fanatic men.” The confirmation of the ordinant will strengthen him for the tasks that lie ahead. The confirmation of the congregation will bolster its confidence in the office of the ministry and its respect for the public ministry. By all of this the office of the public ministry can only be adorned.

The efficacy of the means of grace surely is not dependent on ordination. Ordination is not even absolutely necessary for the valid administration of the means of grace.

Ordination, however, does bring the blessing of God through the Word and prayer upon the office of the ministry. Hence we expect the Lord to bless even that which may be an adiaphoron rather than a divine mandate.

#### **4. Its Practice**

The adoption of this rite by the church today and the implementation of this practice of ordination certainly ought to reflect its origin, its essence, and its purpose.

Since one of its essential features traditionally has been the laying on of hands, the imposition of hands today may well be a significant feature of it. That imposition of hands may signify the imposition of blessings. Sometimes we question how many hands may be necessary to impose such blessings, but that is a matter of judgment and personal preferences.

Since the ordination is a ratification of the call, most are agreed that it ought to take place where that call has originated. That seems to be accepted practice in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Today. The place of ordination apparently was a question of some concerning our Wisconsin Synod back in the ‘30s, when candidates for the ministry who had finished their seminary work were standing idly by without permanent calls. Questions were raised whether they should be ordained when they held no calls, in view of the fact that the call is essential to ordination.

Pastor Carl H. Buenger presented a paper on “The Meaning and Import of Ordination” in 1940 to the Southeastern Wisconsin District, meeting at Hartland, Wisconsin, in which he proposed that such candidates should be ordained. Whether their calls were what he called temporary or general and specific, they were no less divine. He also defended the practice of ordaining a candidate in his home congregation. He suggested that this should be considered a kind of farewell service in which one who had grown up in the congregation and had received his training while a member of the congregation would be sent off with the prayers and blessings of the congregation. He concluded that this was proper and could be beneficial. Since ordination confers no special powers, since it is not a sacrament but rather a church custom, and since the calling congregation was not deprived of anything as it would later install that pastor into his particular office, Buenger defended the ordination of these men. Pastor Buenger assumed, of course, that the ordination had been properly authorized and that it was carried out in decency and order.

However, the practice of ordination taking place where the calling originates is defended in *The Shepherd Under Christ*. “Ordination should take place upon proper authorization in the calling congregation.” This practice, followed in our synod today, would seem to be more justifiable in view of the fact that we regard the purpose of ordination as the affirmation of the call and its acceptance.

Furthermore, when the ordination is conducted apart from the calling body, there may be a greater danger of overemphasis upon the ordination rite. Perhaps then ordination might more easily be regarded in the Roman tradition as a means by which special powers are transmitted to the ordinant or in the Episcopalian tradition as a rite by which apostolic succession is assured.

A view different from that which is generally taken in our circle was given expression by Pastor Alfred Maaske in an essay he delivered on the subject, "When Is a Call a Call, and Who Makes It Such?" He wrote that "when the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church state that ordination is a confirmation of the call, they refer to the call of the church at large and not to the specific placements and appointments." He stated, "Historically in America gifted young men were trained and then examined and placed in specific fields; they were supervised and virtually governed by transfers from one field or another; they were ordained upon graduation, often in their home congregation. Sometimes," he added, "they were ordained en masse in seminary graduation ceremonies." He continued, "There were many who held that the local congregation has the right to call, that only after receiving such a call can a man be ordained, and that ordination may take place only in the calling congregation. They were then forced to explain that ordination in reality is nothing more than the first installation." He added, "This view resulted in other absurd inconsistencies, namely, that men who entered the service of the church as professors could not be ordained, neither could men who had just temporary calls, that the unordained were ineligible for synodical offices." He stated, "It is a legalistic view to teach that a local congregation alone is a true church with the sole right to call. It is further contrary to Scriptures to teach and believe that a call from a local congregation alone makes the minister and gives him the right to be ordained a minister."

Maaske's paper raised many questions for me. On the one hand, he seemed to point accusations at the stand of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod regarding the church and ministry, particularly with respect to the role of the local congregation, and on the other hand, he raised questions regarding the legitimacy of views that apparently have long been held in our fellowship (cf. Schuetze, Habeck, Fritz, Walther, Mueller, et al.).

While it has been stated that there is no essential difference between the ordination and any subsequent installation and that the first installation of a man into the ministry is designated as his ordination, yet there are differences in the liturgical forms that are presented in our *Agenda*. Separate forms are suggested for the ordination of a minister, for the installation of a minister, for the installation of a teacher, and for the induction of a teacher. We teach, of course, that both pastors and teachers occupy positions which involve the ministry of the keys and the doctrine of the call. Their calls in essence are the same even though the scope of their work may vary.

It is obvious, however, that the rite of ordination has been reserved for the first installation only of a minister whose ministry serves the entire congregation. Thus the practice of ordination of teachers has never been followed, at least not to my knowledge, in our synod. However, if ordination is an adiaphoron, and if it is an affirmation or attestation of the call, then it seems to me that this custom could be widened to include anyone who is properly called. And ordination in such cases might serve the same purposes that we underscored in Part Three of this presentation.

If ordination is an adiaphoron and is applied to the called, it technically could also be applied to women who are called. The question here, it seems to me, does not really involve the ordination of women but rather the calling of women for the total ministry of the congregation.

This having been stated, however, there is another consideration. Ordination is a rite which historically has been used by the church for the office of the pastoral ministry. Would Christians be disturbed if our teachers, who traditionally do not share the total ministry of the congregation, were to be ordained? If they would be disturbed by the ordination of male teachers, how much disturbance would be caused, particularly in today's world with women's

liberation moving full speed ahead, were we suddenly to follow the practice of ordaining women as an affirmation and attestation of the legitimacy of their call?

Should we desire to change a longstanding custom of the church, we should have good reasons for doing so, reasons which would be clear to almost everyone. Moreover, we should be governed by love and consideration.

It is no secret that the question regarding ordination of teachers has been raised basically to meet governmental objections to the inclusion of teacherages in a tax-exempt status. Ordination of teachers could be justified to signify that they are properly called, that their calls are valid, and that their ministry in the church is legitimate. Would such a practice, however, possibly create more problems than it would solve? And would a practice initiated for that reason alone, that is, to retain tax exemption, conform to our general policies with respect to "seeking" governmental aid? I grant that there might be a time when one would consciously initiate such a practice just to uphold a position, with respect to the ministry of the church, but it hardly seems justified and in line with past policy to initiate that practice solely for the purpose of maintaining tax-exempt status for teacherages.

Let's face it. Next in line could be the teacherages that we provide for our women. Would we then ordain women to maintain a tax-exempt status for the homes we provide for our women teachers?

Finally, since ordination is an adiaphoron, we should be guided by expediency, by good judgment, and by Christian love. "All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient; all things are lawful unto me, but I will not be brought under the power of any."



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