

## **WHY DOES THE CHURCH ORDAIN FOR MINISTRY?**

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### **WHEN THE FREE METHODIST CHURCH FINDS FUTURE MINISTERS AMBIVALENT OR UNCERTAIN ABOUT THE ORDINATION PROCESS, WHAT'S THE BEST RESPONSE?**

He was a big man, about 40, with clean-shaven face and friendly eyes. I'll call him Seth. He had come to pastoral ministry by an unconventional route but even before being ordained he had planted a church and the church continued to grow. The annual conference had wanted him to finish some course work toward ordination, but he appeared to be experiencing internal resistance.

He felt that his resistance was justified: Why "jump through all those hoops" was his way of thinking about it. After all, he knew his Bible fairly well and he could lead a public worship service. The "hoops" seemed unnecessary. His attitude was by no means hostile, just perplexed and subtly uncooperative.

Those charged with the ordination process in the church should not be surprised at Seth's response. There have always been some who found the ordination process tedious and unnecessarily demanding. However, that sort of response has appeared to increase in recent decades. What counter-response to such attitudes should the church make?

There are certain questions that the church has in mind from the start in relating to men and women presenting themselves for possible ordination. Has this candidate been genuinely converted to Christ, and is the resulting relationship rich and growing? Does he show a serious love for the Scriptures? Is she likable so that she will likely draw others to Christ? Does he show signs of a good work ethic because ministry can be hard work? Does this candidate have a growing ability to communicate the word of God to listeners? Does he come with a good reputation among those who know him best? The questions are many.

But, one more question should be in the thoughts of those who work with candidates throughout the whole process: Is this ordinand developing a Christian mind? That is, is this mind committed to a Biblical world view that includes not only salvation by faith and the call to holy living but also to a deep respect for the God-ordained institutions of life -- family, church, and state? Has the candidate a proper understanding of authority? The neo-pagan influences of our times make questions about the Christian mind more important than ever for ordinands.

To delineate the obstacles to a Christian mind, it may be useful to review some of the philosophical underpinnings of the modern mind — ideas that often seep unaware into the mindset of those seeking to follow Christ. When undetected, these underpinnings foster incompatibilities with the mind of Christ and may make living in ministerial orders difficult. Consider in a general way some such notions.

### **POSTMODERNISM**

In our culture there are unexamined ideas that exist like germs in the air, waiting to be inhaled and cause "illness." These unexamined ideas might unconsciously support an ambivalent attitude toward ordination, even among committed Christians. Like germs, they seem to be caught outside of conscious awareness, usually unknowingly until the fever symptoms set in. At the present time, there is a whole constellation of ideas in circulation so serious that they are threatening the very foundations of our society. This constellation is being referred to commonly as "postmodernism."

The various strands of postmodernism are difficult to identify because they are numerous and not necessarily coherent. They may include a repudiation of those values of the past -- call them traditions -- in favor of a fresh and untried set. They sometimes question the validity of rational thought, and cast doubt on the whole concept of objective truth. Postmodern influences are highly individualistic and relativistic. That is, they are limited to the notion that the choices an individual makes should be of concern to no one but that individual, and there is no truth but one's personal truth.

On the face of it, one can see that these ideas are antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel repudiates subjectivism in favor of eternal truth as it is revealed to us in Jesus; the gospel is rooted in a world view that has its origin in an ancient book, the Bible; it counters a radical individualism by its truth about interpersonal relationships in family and society and the church of Jesus Christ. Ordinands must be helped to work these issues out in fellowship and study during the years of preparation.

However, we should not think that persons like Seth come to the possibility of ordination with a full cup of this postmodern brew. That would be unlikely. But it is possible that they have in some inward way been exposed to postmodern ideas so that while they seek ordination in a long established church they may feel ambivalent about what they are seeking, and this may show in some resistance to the process.

There are two more distinct influences that have been known to cloud the issues for candidates moving toward ordained ministry -- anti-intellectualism and anti-institutionalism.

### **ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM**

In the middle of the nineteenth century there were revival experiences among conservative churches that sometimes moved converts quickly from a godless life to a life of serious Christian devotion. Their gifts flourished and some rose rapidly to become self-made preachers and leaders. It was a from-plow-to-pulpit phenomenon that supported a sort of "rugged individualism" and the prevalent American idealism of the "self-made man." It was easy to ask, "Who needs 'book learning' if God has called me to preach? If I open my mouth, God will fill it." A corresponding resistance to diligent study and careful training must have existed just under the surface.

This cultural phenomenon did not disappear with the closing of the nineteenth century, nor the twentieth. Even today, anti-intellectualism is a more common response to education and training in contemporary culture than we might suppose. Educators identify it in the high school and the university. It may, therefore, still lie deep at the subconscious level of well-meaning Christian minds when they are required to meet standards. Or if it comes to asking them to complete prescribed disciplines as qualifications for ordination.

### **ANTI-INSTITUTIONALISM**

Another and more common influence that may undergird resistance to ordination is the fruit of a culture-wide revolution that surfaced in the 1960s of the last century. For our purposes call this influence anti-institutionalism. Though the revolution in its explosive period roughly spanned the years 1960-1975, it continues in a more deliberate way to the present. Consider, for just one instance, the various efforts to overthrow traditional ideas about marriage. This overthrow has seemed to become full blown and generally acceptable in the past three or four decades.

This "sixties revolution" was marked by a great upheaval in the youth culture of that period, and by an overthrow of societal norms, particularly sexual norms. In extreme cases it produced massed riots against established law enforcement and university authorities. In fact, at the core of this many-faceted phenomenon was the impulse to overthrow established authority and set down new moral and societal norms from the ground up. This revolution, at least in its less radical expressions, simply showed contempt for established ways of doing things. To be sure, there are good and civil ways of questioning existing norms, and norms are always under review. The revolution, however, passed these ways by in favor of a radical overthrow.

During those years, for example, I attended a large all-college picnic for a Christian institution at a lake. There I saw the young people spontaneously baptizing one another off shore as a religious event while several ordained clergymen stood on the shore and watched. Even if unconsciously, these young people were making an obvious statement, mixing religious fervor with anti-institutional impulses. That sort of thing surfaced in many ways. In extreme cases, during the '60s, some Christian young people left their established congregation and formed their own house churches. This was another obvious statement. In the more secular realm, young people in great numbers abandoned family and societal connections and established communes with new rules and new and untried ways of relating.

During that decade and beyond, there was evident hostility toward authority in any form, whether in home, church, or state. I was there and I heard the stories. I remember that those sharing their stories were hurting deeply too from the breakup of societal connections. But the revolution prevailed.

It's unrealistic to think that young people who were steeped in this revolutionary ideology would seek ordination in a conservative, traditional denomination. But, in succeeding decades, some young people who did survive the revolution in visible ways came back to accept with raised eyebrows the ways of the established church. Sometimes they brought with them unexamined anti-institutional feelings of lesser but damaging intensities. It was as though they accepted what they found in the church but with a whisper of skepticism. Other young people professed with genuine sincerity a call to pastoral ministry but had a hard time accepting the long established procedures of the church -- particularly those leading to ordination. This, it appeared to me, was Seth's case. His sense of discipleship was genuine; one could not question his call to ministry; his work was effective. But seeking ordination by the meeting of what he regarded as the institutional "hoops" of an established church seemed to create resistance, and motivation was scarcely there.

### **HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH RESPOND?**

The denomination that runs into such influences, it seems to me, has one of three options: (1) When such impulses are detected, it can just ignore them and hope that in the process of ordination and beyond those influences will go away. Is such a response wise? It is careless to leave intact the notion that candidates for ministry can dig out on their own all the things they need to know and the procedures they need to understand to be effective. Directed education and training can sharpen, accelerate and deepen their development. In the recent past, ignoring this has proven damaging both to the ordinand and the church. Simply put, unexamined ideas can go on influencing motivations in ways that are hurtful.

(2) It may reject outright any candidates who are suspected of having anti-institutional leanings. Again, such a response is shortsighted and is likely to turn away promising candidates who can be taught and who may bring freshness and spiritual vigor to the church. (3) It might include in the early stages of the process a seminar that can bring to light secularly derived impulses foreign to the church and can give ordinands opportunity to identify them and discuss them. The rest of this paper is partial to the third option.

The first question to be answered is: why is ordination necessary? For Seth or for other men or women like him, the denomination has an obligation to restate to generation after generation the long established reasons for requiring careful steps to ordination. Consider three reasons why ordination is necessary.

### **ORDINATION IS A FORM OF CERTIFICATION**

At the purely human level, ordination is a form of certification. The captain of the plane my wife and I flew on recently had gold bars decorating the epaulets on his shoulders. They spoke volumes -- years of supervised training, classroom courses, piloting under expert supervision, and even refresher procedures from time to time. If, we had noted when we boarded the plane, that he was dressed in sweats and sneakers we would have turned away and inquired about other flights. It would have been clear that he was not yet qualified for the task of flying 262 people from point A to point B 1400 miles in distance.

The same matter of certification holds true for the doctor I saw recently. He had credentials posted on his office wall that told me where he had studied medicine, what specialty he was qualified to practice, and any special certifications he had gained beyond these. I would not have let him put his cold stethoscope on my chest as one step in his examination if I had not been sure he had been certified to do so. In fact, I would not even put my four year old automobile on the hoist of a mechanic for transmission repairs if he could not show evidence of being certified to do the repairs

Certification is a common sense reason for ordination. As Moses learned from his Midianite father-in-law, we can learn from our secular world. All such serious temporal enterprises, whether dealing with my life, health, or valuable property should be conducted by qualified personnel and that requires some form of certification. That is, evidence that the person has been examined and approved by experts who were qualified to judge.

Admittedly, even then, there are degrees of excellence within the ranks of the certified, and there are occasionally certified practitioners who don't deserve the trust we are asked to place in them. We expect such incompetent persons to be eventually sorted out. Moreover, we should not use the incompetence of the few as an argument against the certification of the many. Certification procedures in many realms still erect standards by which the public generally can make its choices and be protected.

### **WHY MINISTERS SHOULD BE CERTIFIED**

Ordination is not intended to bestow honor; it is intended to bestow authority for service. When one thinks of this authority, the need for certification is obvious. A minister is authorized to teach the Scriptures and the doctrines of the church. This requires more than Sunday School knowledge; it calls for serious prior supervised study and eventual certification. In their line of duty, ministers may enter the homes of the community to visit a young family, or to pray with a housebound elderly person. Ministers may call on hospital patients on the eve of their surgery. Or they may be called on to counsel parties to a crumbling marriage, or to hear the painful confessions of a deeply troubled conscience. Ministers may also be called upon to represent their church at a community function.

In each case, the minister is conducting a "representative ministry." That is, in a sense, every member of the church is a minister but does not have the time or training to carry out all such pastoral duties. So, the church is provided with a minister who can represent the body in such situations. Under the most wholesome circumstances, none of these pastoral tasks should be assigned to an uncertified novice. Some authorizing body must be responsible to act on behalf of the denomination in determining that this person has the basic education, training, and Christian character for such assignments. This calls for a carefully laid out program leading to certification and oversight.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT ON ORDINATION?**

The detail about the preparation of persons for ordained ministry is buried deep in the history of the New Testament church. There we are not told everything we would like to know. Even so, although the explicit word for ordination does not appear in the Greek Scriptures, there are a number of indications to show that care was taken to set apart certain believers for the special task of ministry or oversight. For example, from his wider throng of disciples, and after a whole night of prayer, our Lord set apart twelve of his followers as "apostles" (Lk. 6:12-16). The word means, "one sent with a commission." Jesus gave them authority to carry out a special ministry on his behalf.

Later, after the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost, the developing church had to face the need for a fairer distribution of resources to needy widows. The whole body was asked to choose seven men "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3) and to bring them before the Apostles. In Luke's record Stephen is singled out among the seven duly chosen as "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5). The Apostles in turn, by prayer and the laying on of hands, set the seven apart to be deacons (servants) to the church (Acts 6:6). In this brief account we can see that the whole company of believers was

consulted but the authority of the Apostles was exercised for the actual ordination by means of prayer and the laying on of hands.

The fullest insight into the developing practices of the early church is given in the pastoral epistles. In writing to Timothy, the Apostle Paul exhorted, "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you (1 Tim. 4:14). Three things stand out in this concise word. (1) What he was to exercise was given to him as a gift (charisma); in other words a spiritual endowment he would need for the work of ministering. (2) The gift was apparently bestowed in his case through a prophetic message. (3) The gift was conferred by means of the laying on of hands.

There are other references to the act of setting apart for ministry which we refer to as ordination. The Apostle Paul may have had reference to the same ordaining event as above when he wrote, "For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands (1 Tim. 1:6). Apparently Timothy tended to be timid and the Apostle, his spiritual mentor, was reminding him that whatever was given in the initial ordination was not to be left to merely smolder but was by spiritual discipline and earnest application to be kept flaming brightly.

One thing that stands out in the pastoral references to the setting apart of leaders in the New Testament church was the emphasis on integrity of character. Much is said about this. The overseer must "fight the good fight, holding on to faith and a good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:19). He must be "above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self controlled, respectable ..." (1 Tim. 3:2ff). In the same passage, he must be "apt to teach" and therefore is expected to be well taught in the Scriptures and the formulation of Christian doctrine. Given such high requirements, it is not surprising that Paul's instructions included that an ordinand "must not be a recent convert ..." (1 Tim. 3:6) and this is matched by the Apostle's later instructions "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands," (1 Tim. 5:22). This is an obvious reference to what the church through the centuries has called ordination.

The New Testament makes clear that the act of ordination must not be seen as some sort of a terminus for the minister. Development must go on. Ministry must continue to be fresh, ardent and effective. It is to have a growing edge, especially in the teaching and preaching of the Word. Paul wrote to Timothy long after Timothy had been set apart for ministry by the laying on of hands and had been Paul's companion in mission, "Work hard so God can approve you. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15 NLT).

## **ORDINATION PRACTICES SINCE THE FIRST CENTURY**

Ordination is not a recent invention of the church. The New Testament makes it clear that from the beginning certain believers were set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands for the work of full time ministry. Some call it representative ministry because it is a ministry in which special officers act on behalf of the whole congregation. Paul reminded Titus, for example, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint (ordain) elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). But minimal detail is given as to specific procedures. As the Christian church of succeeding centuries developed, it locked onto the insights set forth in the New Testament, holding to them firmly, and then filling out the details.

For example, the word "ordinand" is related to the word "order." It has to do with how the church orders its life and particularly its leadership. It suggests that a person is set aside in the church for holy office. Ordination, however, is not just an event in a Sunday morning service at an annual conference; it is a process. Properly speaking, from the time candidates enter the process they are ordinands. This reflects the historic concern shown that persons set apart for full time ministry are to be as fully prepared for the task as is possible before they are ordained by prayer and the laying on of hands.

With the passing of the centuries different Christian bodies have developed ordination procedures they believed were consistent with the will of the Lord of the church. Sometimes, it appears, concepts have gone well beyond New Testament standards. For example, by the end of the Middle Ages the Roman

church had developed doctrines and procedures that established the primacy of the clergy over the laity. This made the church too hierarchical. The Reformation theologians repudiated it. Ordination does not bestow some special grace over that of ordinary Christians. But ordination is intended to bestow a special power and authority for service. Ordination, with the laying on of the hands of the ordained elders implies the bestowal of a divine gift for service. This is generally agreed to by most Christian communions.

## **THE FREE METHODIST WAY**

When Seth showed ambivalence about the process of ordination, this may have resulted not only from certain unexamined anti-institutional feelings. The feelings may have been encouraged by the neglect of conference authorities to sit down and explain what the whole process would be like, and how Free Methodist practices would be followed. On that assumption, consider some of the highlights of the Free Methodist way.

1. WHAT AUTHORITY? The church assumes that at the end of the process, a threefold authority has been bestowed upon the ordained elder. (i) There is the internal authority of an inward call of God. Throughout the process, care is taken to assure that the person under training understands and possesses an authentic divine call to the ordained ministry. (ii) There is an external authority bestowed by the church in the ordination service itself. The ordaining officer will say, "Take thou authority ....." (iii) There is the authority of a godly life. Ordination must not be thought of as only an event, a one hour service of public worship; it must also be seen as a process. Throughout the training period, the ordinand is prompted to develop a devotional life that is daily and authentic, and to gain a basic understanding of how to preach and teach the Scriptures, as well as to master the issues of ministerial ethics, and to live a life that is blameless before God. For pastoral effectiveness there is no substitute for this third aspect of the minister's authority. Neither the divine call nor the certifying action of the church can be a substitute for a godly life.

2. WHO ORDAINS? Ordinands needs to know who is really doing the ordaining because that will indicate to them the grounds of their accountability. In the Free Methodist church historically, the ordaining of ministers is the responsibility of the annual conference. Although this body assigns the details of the task to a special committee, called The Ministerial Education and Guidance Committee, no one can be formally ordained until that committee makes a recommendation to the annual conference and the annual conference affirms the recommendation by vote.

This vote makes the issue of accountability clear. It also reflects the degree to which the episcopal system on which the Free Methodist Church is based has been "democratized." That is, the ordination itself is not the bishop's sole responsibility; nor is it the sole responsibility of the special committee; nor even of all the ministers. It is the responsibility of the whole conference. This in turn is a representative body made up of all conference ministers plus an approximately equal number of lay persons delegated to the annual conference by local churches.

Beyond providing ordinands with a clear sense of accountability and support, there are distinct advantages to having the ordination solemnized while annual conference is in session. For one thing, the progress of all ordinands can be brought up to date annually and in a fully supported way. For another, the annual meeting gives the ordinand opportunity to observe the workings of the conference in its many aspects. It also gives new ministers a chance to know and become known by colleagues and major lay people of the conference. That is, it encourages a sense of collegiality. For yet another, new ordinands coming into the fellowship are made to belong by being assigned minor responsibilities such as serving as tellers for the business sessions. All of this together enlightens, encourages, inspires, and develops community interdependence.

One final advantage is that newly ordained ministers are made aware that in the Free Methodist Church ministers are held to a standard both for character and performance. That is, once a year the Board of Ministerial Education and Guidance is required to review the list of ministers regarding their "character and performance." and report to the annual conference. This is a sign that the denomination is

concerned that all ministers live under the discipline of the church and be called to excellence in the performance of their service. It is a feature of being in orders.

3. **THE BISHOP'S ROLE.** Bishops with rare exception are the ordaining officers of the Free Methodist Church. Why this is so and how they serve as strong links in the denomination is of special interest. They are elected by a general conference which is a grouping of annual conferences and which is convened every three or four years. They are in office under the authority of the general conference but at the same time they serve as presidents of annual conferences which they convene yearly. One of their most important functions during this yearly event is to officiate at the ordination service. Their presence gives dignity and weight to the event. As a result, the office of bishop is one means of linking the denomination together and nurturing a sense of uniformity.

Ordinands must understand that in Free Methodist ecclesiology, bishops do not function as bosses or managers. According to longstanding Free Methodist ecclesiastical procedures they are not CEOs. Like all elders they are servants of the church but are set apart for a special leadership assignment. They are not elders who are then "ordained" to a higher office; rather, they are elders who are then "elected" to serve as general overseers. Historically, the office of bishop has been highly respected in the denomination and this gives those who fill it leverage and authority. Within the bounds of the constitution and Book of Discipline they lead through preaching, teaching, writing, vision casting, counseling, and administrating. They are to be models of representative ministry.

**WHO CARES FOR THE DETAILS?** Each annual conference is expected to keep records regarding the progress of ordinands and the specific credits they have gained, whether in education or service. This is a large task. Add to this the work of evaluating ministers who are transferring from other bodies, ministers transferring out, ministers retiring, etc., and it is clear that careful secretarial work is required.

But after all details have been considered, the excellence of a system is determined by the excellence of the persons who apply it. Therefore, the spiritual intensity of the whole process and the amount of diligence on the part of all personnel -- ordinands, conference committees, recording secretaries, superintendents, bishops, and in fact the conference body itself -- will determine the quality of ministers the church prepares and ordains. It is always hoped that the results of all this detail will be ministers who have a passion for the work of the gospel and a pastoral concern for those the church enfold in membership.

### **THE BLESSINGS THAT FLOW FROM ORDINATION**

Men and women like Seth can get value from an overview of the ordaining process in the Free Methodist Church. It is more than simply a series of frivolous exercises like "jumping through hoops." It is a serious effort, bathed in prayer on the part of all participants, to find, direct, guide and certify those persons upon whom God has placed his call to ordained ministry. And it is a serious effort to bring them to that moment when the prayers of the church and the laying on of the hands of all the elders links them to the chosen company of the ages who have accepted God's special call and have responded in obedience. No Christian body should claim that its ordination procedures exactly reproduce the practices of the New Testament church. But all procedures should have the fundamental elements spoken of there --prayer and the laying on of hands. This is where the Free Methodist Church stands.

But, the candidate for ministry who follows the course described can experience great values from the process. Here are some of the benefits.

1. Ordination gives confirmation that a careful effort has been made to recognize and affirm in a minister a subjective inner call from the Lord matched by an objective and outward call of the church. And this recognition is important not only to the ordinand and his family but to the body to which ordained ministers offer their services. For example, in any congregation there are likely to be many who have taken pains to be certified for their respective vocations. It is only right that the minister sent to lead them should also have seriously prepared for a spiritual leadership assignment too.

2. Ordination, in its crowning step -- the prayers of the worshiping body and the laying on of hands of all elders at a conference gathering -- authorizes the candidate to carry out the demanding work of ministry on a day-to-day basis. One is not long into the work of representative ministry before it becomes evident that "we wrestle not against flesh and blood." Real ministry is warfare. It is good at such times for the minister to look upon the call as not only divinely given but also as sealed by a company of God's people. Ordination is a moment to look back to and draw upon.

3. Ordination gives one a sense of belonging. One is not merely an adherent, a hired hand, a salaried worker, a performer, a careerist, a mercenary. One is living out a divine calling in company with other women and men who labor under the same mandate. Ordination should give one a collegial sense, a sense of having been taken into a company of people upon whom both Christ and his church have laid hands of commissioning.

4. The sense of calling involved in ordination anchors one in life and gives one a sense of purpose that can't be easily reduced to a mere "career." That sense is there when the temptations to seek easier work is brought on by the kind of stresses that only ardent ministers know. Ordination is really a testimony that we believe God has set us apart for a special ministry and the church has set us apart to live out that calling.

5. When ordination is taken seriously by both ordinands and the church it tends to contribute respect to all concerned. It is not that ordination is for purposes of honor. It is rather for purposes of service. Ministers often are called to suffer as an element in their calling. For some, the cost has been persecution and death. Nevertheless, when the work of ordination is done seriously and men and women are well prepared for their task, this tends to nurture respect -- the respect ministers have for themselves, the respect congregations have for their ministers, and the respect ministers show their congregations.