

ORDINATION: THE RECOGNITION OF A CALL TO MINISTRY

POSITION PAPER

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Introduction

Ministry is the word most often used to identify the work of the Christian clergy. In its biblical sense, however, *ministry* is a more comprehensive term that properly denotes the work of the whole Church, the body of Christ in the world. Ministry is what the Church does in obedience to the commands of her Lord.

Our English word *ministry* translates several words in the New Testament, the most prominent being *diakonia* (“service, ministry”) and its related forms. The *diakonia* word group, including also the verb *diakoneō* (“to serve, minister”) and the noun *diakonos* (“servant, minister, deacon”), occurs about one hundred times and denotes most basically the humble service one person renders to another. In New Testament times, it was often the work of a servant who waited tables or fulfilled other menial tasks.

Jesus—The Model for Ministry

Ministry in the New Testament is taught and modeled by Jesus Christ and can never be understood or realized apart from Him. Therefore, a biblical study of ministry may adequately begin with the life and teachings of our Lord, as presented in the New Testament.

Ministry is *incarnational*. In Jesus of Nazareth, God came to dwell among human beings. The Gospel of John affirms, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14).¹ Matthew’s designation of the virgin-born Jesus as “Immanuel . . . God with us” (Matthew 1:23) teaches much the same. The Son of God took upon Himself full humanity to draw near to His human creatures and secure their redemption through the atoning sacrifice of the Cross. As Paul expressed it, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Ministry is *kerygmatic*. Drawn from the noun *kērygma* (“proclamation”), this term highlights the central place of the preaching of the gospel. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jesus’ Nazareth sermon, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19; reading Isaiah 61:1–2).

Ministry is *empowered by the Holy Spirit*. The Gospels strikingly depict the descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at the outset of His ministry, immediately after His baptism and before His public activity (Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32). Peter described this event as an “anointing,” which empowered Jesus for His work: “After the baptism that John preached . . . God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and . . . he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37–38). Jesus Himself frequently referred to the power of the Spirit at work in His miracles (Matthew 12:28; Luke 4:14, 18).

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture references and quotations are from the New International Version, 2011 (NIV).

Ministry is *humble service*. In counteracting the self-serving instincts of the disciples, Jesus pointed to the nature of His ministry: “Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Luke also reported Jesus’ words, “I am among you as one who serves” (Luke 22:27). Nowhere is Jesus’ attitude better illustrated than at the Last Supper, where He chastened His competitive followers: “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14).

Ministry is *shepherding*. Jesus depicted Himself as a faithful and caring shepherd who knows each of His sheep and leads each out to water and pasture (cf. John 10:1–18). Never abusing or exploiting, the Good Shepherd interposes His own body between the sheep and all dangers. Repeatedly Jesus made the point, “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11, 15, 17, 18). Elsewhere in the New Testament, He is called the “great Shepherd” (Hebrews 13:20), “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25), and the “Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4).

Ministry is *relational*. Early in His ministry, Jesus called the Twelve to be with Him (Matthew 10:1–4; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16). These, His disciples (also known as apostles), were intimately involved with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. Jesus invested Himself in them, teaching and training them for their service during His human life and beyond. He questioned them and answered their questions, taught, and entrusted them with the ministry.

The ministry of Jesus culminated in His death, which He willingly suffered as a substitutionary offering for the sins of humanity (Matthew 26:28; Mark 10:45). He gave Himself, in life and death, for others.

The Church as the Extension of Christ’s Ministry

The Gospels show that Jesus intended to extend His ministry through the Church, which He would found and build (Matthew 16:18). One of His earliest actions was calling designated apostles “that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14), as He did.

After His death and resurrection, Christ explicitly commissioned the apostles to carry on His ministry. Claiming all authority in heaven and on earth, He charged them, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20).

Maintaining this emphasis, Luke records Jesus’ prophecy that repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations. The disciples were to be His witnesses, and for that purpose they would shortly receive the promised heavenly power (Luke 24:46–49). John’s Gospel describes Jesus’ commission to the disciples: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (20:21). It was then Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:22).

Awareness of a derived and continuing ministry moved the disciples to seek a replacement for Judas. Casting lots to distinguish between Barsabbas and Matthias, they prayed, “Lord, . . . show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs” (Acts 1:24–25). In selecting seven men to handle the

social services of the Early Church, the apostles were conscious of the primacy of their ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The central task of leadership in the Early Church was anointed proclamation of God's Word to His people.

Participation in ministry was not limited to the Twelve, nor even to the larger group of apostles that included Paul, James, and others as well. Fellow workers of the apostles were readily called *diakonos* or "minister": Phoebe (Romans 16:1); Tychicus (Ephesians 6:21, NASB);² Epaphras (Colossians 1:7, NRSV);³ Timothy (1 Timothy 4:6). Others are said to participate in *diakonia* or "ministry": the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 16:15, NASB), Archippus (Colossians 4:17, NASB), and Mark (2 Timothy 4:11). Qualified elders were chosen and prayerfully commissioned for ministry in each new missionary church (Acts 14:23). Ministry, then, was not the sole prerogative of an apostolic or priestly elite to be passed down from generation to generation by a rite of apostolic succession. It was a pervasive and vibrant gift of the Spirit, shaping and energizing leaders wherever the Church was planted.

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Ministry

The necessity of a spiritual endowment for ministry is apparent in Jesus and the apostles. The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus at His baptism was a prerequisite to His ministry (Mark 1:9–13). Jesus specifically instructed the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until they had received the promised Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5). Only after baptism in the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost were they thrust into public ministry. From that point, their ministries were carried out with a striking sense of the Spirit's power and wisdom. The Acts narrative demonstrates that Spirit baptism, followed by continual Spirit enablement, is essential to effective Christian ministry.

Paul's understanding of his induction into ministry is revealing. "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power" (Ephesians 3:7). Paul was undoubtedly conscious of being "called" (Romans 1:1). He also possessed excellent theological training (Acts 22:3). But in describing his ministry, it was far more natural for him to speak of an inner work of the Spirit, which supernaturally gifted him to be a minister of the gospel of Christ.

That same sense of sovereign, supernatural action in the preparation of ministers is present in Paul's exhortations to the elders of Ephesus, as recounted in Acts, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). While in all probability Paul had been instrumental in the public ordination of these elders, he was deeply aware of a powerful, prior work of the Spirit that their public "ordination" merely facilitated.

Historically, the Church has spoken of the divine summons to vocational ministry as a "call to the ministry." Indeed, the Scriptures frequently indicate that God does summon individuals to devote their lives, especially to His service. Abraham (Genesis 12:1), Moses (Exodus 3:6, 10), and Isaiah (Isaiah 6:8–9) are Old Testament examples. In the New Testament, Jesus personally called the Twelve (Mark 3:13–14), and the Holy Spirit prophetically set apart Paul and Barnabas for their missionary assignment (Acts 13:2).

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³ "NRSV" refers to the New Revised Standard Version © 1989.

The Scriptures also support the Church's traditional concept of an inward call, to describe the individual's awareness of a divine summons to ministry, and an outward call that attests to the Church that God has indeed summoned the individual. But, it must always be remembered that those who are called to the ministry are first supernaturally gifted by the Spirit to fulfill that call. Like Paul, they become ministers "by the gift of God's grace . . . through the working of his power" (Ephesians 3:7).

Spiritual Gifts for Ministry

If ministry is indeed effected by the gifting and energy of the Spirit, then the New Testament emphasis on spiritual gifts assumes even greater significance. Paul, especially, urges attention to spiritual gifts. To the Corinthians, he wrote, "Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift" (1 Corinthians 1:7). And to the Romans, he wrote, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong" (Romans 1:11). Though in this last instance, Paul used the words *charisma* and *pneumatikon* together, his preferred term for a spiritual gift is *charisma*. Less frequently, he also used the term *pneumatikon*, which also means "spiritual gift" (1 Corinthians 12:1, 28; 14:1).

A wide range of spiritual gifts affects and accompanies the multifaceted ministry already observed in the New Testament. The Acts of the Apostles, with repeated emphasis upon the Spirit's powerful and wise direction of the Christian mission, with many signs and wonders, appears to be a narrative theology of spiritual gifts.

The broader teaching of the New Testament letters points out that a special gift (or gifts) of the Spirit has been given to every believer to qualify him or her for one or more special ministries: "To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift" (Ephesians 4:7, NASB).

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us" (Romans 12:6). "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7). There is a similar emphasis in 1 Peter 4:10: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." The writer to the Hebrews noted that "God also testified to it [the salvation announced first by the Lord Jesus] by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will" (Hebrews 2:4).

Several relevant lists of spiritual gifts are included in the New Testament. There are the familiar nine gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, message of wisdom, message of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miraculous powers, prophecy, distinguishing between spirits, speaking in different kinds of tongues, interpretation of tongues. Several of these gifts are also found in the lists of Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:28–30; and Ephesians 4:11.

These nine gifts may easily be recognized as supernatural and spontaneous, always under the immediate control of the Spirit, who uses obedient and sensitive believers in their manifestation. But sprinkled among the gift lists are other critical spiritual gifts for carrying on the work of the Church. They are serving (Romans 12:7), teaching (Romans 12:7), encouraging (Romans 12:8), giving (Romans 12:8), leadership (Romans 12:8), showing mercy (Romans 12:8), helping others (1 Corinthians 12:28), and guidance (1 Corinthians 12:28). These gifts are not so readily recognized as supernatural, but nonetheless have their origin and energy in the work of the Holy Spirit who sovereignly

equips believers to be used regularly, energetically, and conscientiously in the service of the Church.

Although the gifts that are listed probably cover most ministry needs of the Church, there is no reason to think the New Testament writers intended to be comprehensive. For example, there is no reference to gifts of music, though the New Testament does mention “spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). The Old Testament attributes gifts of craftsmanship to the Holy Spirit (Exodus 31:2–3). It is reasonable to think the Spirit grants other gifts to the Church to meet specific needs. Paul seemed at great pains to emphasize variety: “There are different kinds of gifts [*charisma*], . . . different kinds of service [*diakonia*], . . . different kinds of working (*energēma*)” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6).

In every case, these gifts are set within the context of the Church and designed for ministry to and through the body of Christ in its fulfillment of the Great Commission. Before noting the “different kinds of working” of Romans 12:6, Paul stressed the Church’s interdependence, “We, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). The gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 are prefaced by a similar statement, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). The rationale for the gifts of Ephesians 4:11 is “to equip his people for works of service [*diakonia*], so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

The purpose of spiritual gifts is most clearly expressed in 1 Corinthians 12:7, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Spiritual gifts are intended for the upbuilding of the congregation at-large. Their only justification is to serve the purposes of Christ in His church, a lesson lost on the immature Corinthians who demeaned the gifts by their proud exhibitionism.

It is also to be emphasized that just as the Spirit comes upon all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ without respect to ethnicity, age, or sex, so spiritual gifts, the essential tools of ministry, are bestowed upon all. The implications for the ministry of women, especially, must not be ignored.

Ministry Belongs to the Entire Church

Our study of ministry and spiritual gifts makes it clear that ministry is the work of the entire body of Christ, not just of a priestly or clerical caste. Even the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher do not exist as ends in themselves or as rewards for a select elite. They are expressly given “to equip his people for works of service (*diakonia*), so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

Every member of the body of Christ participates in the ministry of the Church; all are called in some way to be ministers. To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into the ministry of His church. No group of leaders alone can embody the full spectrum of spiritual gifts and provide all the wisdom and energy required to do the work of the Church. The ministry of the congregation at-large is integral to the accomplishment of the mission of the Church.

Spiritual gifting for ministry is also without regard to race or sex. Wherever the Church exists, the Holy Spirit pours out His gifts, “and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines” (1 Corinthians 12:11). Spiritual gifts are bestowed as widely as the blessing of salvation in which “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Consequently, there is no scriptural basis for excluding any believer from the gifting of the Holy Spirit. “ ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. . . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy’ ” (Acts 2:17–18, from Joel 2:28–29). Both the teachings and the historical examples of the New Testament show that women and men of various ethnic backgrounds were granted spiritual gifts for the ministry of the Church.

Ordination as Recognition of Spiritual Leadership

A robust, biblical doctrine of the ministry of the laity may at first appear to diminish the necessity and importance of ordained clergy (those who are specially set apart for the leadership of the Church). On the contrary, it heightens the need, for the laity must be spiritually formed, trained, and led on a massive scale if the mission of the Church is to be accomplished. Scripture emphasizes that ministry leaders are Christ’s gifts for the explicit purpose of preparing the people of God for their ministries of building up the Church (Ephesians 4:7–13).

The selection and preparation of spiritual leaders is a crucial matter throughout the New Testament. Jesus’ appointment and nurture of the first apostles provided servant-leaders who exercised a vital leadership role in the Early Church. The Twelve were also aided by people like Stephen (Acts 6), Philip (Acts 8), and Barnabas (Acts 13), whom the Spirit singularly marked out for leadership in advancing the mission of the Church. These and others are to be found among an expanding leadership group in the New Testament.

Paul and Barnabas were careful to appoint elders for leadership in each new church (Acts 14:23). For that appointment, Luke used a verb (*cheirotoneō*), which means “to choose, to appoint or elect by raising hands.” Thus, the congregations may well have had a part in the selection, as in the choice of the “seven” in the Jerusalem church (Acts 6:1–6). These appointments were made in a context of prayer, fasting, and apparently with some kind of public “ordination” service.

Divine initiative in the appointment of spiritual leaders is fundamental to New Testament theology. Instructing the churches he had established, Paul wrote, “And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:28, NASB).

First, note that these “offices” (or “ministries”) are of divine origin. Second, they are arranged in a specific order—first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then Spirit-gifted individuals with a wide array of spiritual gifts, both miraculous (e.g., “healings” and “tongues”) and functional (e.g., “administrations”) Third, all these ministries are charismatic, in that they are granted and energized as specific gifts of God by His Spirit. Fourth, the ministries of both the “leaders” and the “led,” the “pastors” and the “parishioners,” flow from the *charismata*, the spiritual gifts.

Paul wrote in much the same way in his letter to Ephesus. “So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11). These ministries are not provided by human initiative, but by the grace (4:7) of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, who “gave gifts to his people” (4:8).

Ordination of Ministry Leaders

The Assemblies of God Statement of Fundamental Truths, statement 11. The Ministry, asserts that “a divinely called and scripturally ordained ministry has been provided by our Lord for the fourfold purpose of leading the Church in: (1) evangelization of the world (Mark 16:15–20), (2) worship of God (John 4:23–24), (3) building a Body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son (Ephesians 4:11, 16), and (4) meeting human need with ministries of love and compassion (Psalm 112:9; Galatians 2:10; 6:10; James 1:27).”⁴

The Assemblies of God has chosen to denote three classifications of ministry—the certified minister, the licensed minister, and the ordained minister. The church also recognizes a fourth classification, the local church credential, a limited credential granted by a local assembly. *Ordination* is the term used for the highest level of ministerial classification the Assemblies of God recognizes, a classification available to both men and women.⁵ All ministers are encouraged to progress to ordination. Ordination, the highest classification, allows ministers to express their commitment to present to the Lord the best of their service to His call on their lives.

The selection of spiritual leaders throughout Scripture is usually recognized in a public way that signifies the spiritual origins of the call. In the Old Testament, a formal anointing with oil, bringing with it the power of the Spirit, accompanied God’s selection. Jesus purposefully drew the twelve disciples aside and appointed them to be apostles (Mark 3:13–19). Judas’s successor was prayerfully and publicly chosen (Acts 1:15–26). When the seven deacons were chosen, the apostles prayed and “laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6). Similarly, when the Spirit announced His choice of Paul and Barnabas for missionary service, the decision was followed by fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands (Acts 13:2–3).

Paul’s letters to Timothy, who represents a younger generation of ministers, imply a kind of formal ordination. At some unidentified point, Paul and a body of elders laid hands on Timothy to set him apart for the ministry. The work of the Spirit in Timothy’s ordination is also noteworthy, “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you” (1 Timothy 4:14). Moreover, Paul continued to mentor his young colleague, reminding him to “fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands” (2 Timothy 1:6).

The practice of selecting and “ordaining” qualified elders, crucial to the success of the missionary churches, became a strategic step for Paul’s ministry team. Following the pattern of his first missionary journey (Acts 14:23), Paul commanded Titus, charged with setting the churches of Crete in order, “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Timothy, likewise, had as a part of his ministry similar tasks in the appointment and supervision of elders (1 Timothy 5:17–22).

The Meaning and Value of Ordination

Because the Assemblies of God strives to model after the biblical practice of highly vetted, faithful, and publicly accountable leadership on every level, the term *ordination* is chosen to speak of the highest, most respected ministry status.

⁴ For further explanation of the Assemblies of God position on qualification and expectations for, and process of ministerial recognition, including ordination, see the Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, “Ministry.”

⁵ See Assemblies of God Bylaws, Article VII, Section 2, paragraph 1. Also, see the Assemblies of God Position Paper, “The Role of Women in Ministry,” <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Position-Papers/The-Role-of-Women-in-Ministry>.

Ordination publicly expresses the value of one's call to ministry. The divine call to ministry is paramount in importance; God chooses human vessels to lead His church and to prepare its members for service to the Kingdom. The Church has the privilege of acknowledging that call in a public ceremony that shows the value of the minister whom God has called and equipped for His service.

Ordination affirms the minister's divine call to ministry. There is the internal assurance that God has called one to ministry, and that inner conviction is crucial. Ordination allows the Church to come alongside the minister, affirming what he or she knows deep within. The ordination service becomes an "Ebenezer stone" type moment (1 Samuel 7:12) to which the ordinees can return throughout their ministry to remind them of the assurance of God's call upon their lives.

Ordination communicates to the candidate the affirmation of the Church on their call to and involvement in ministry. The ultimate recognition for all ministry must come from the Lord, who issued the call. It is before Him that all are called into account and from whom endorsement comes. However, it also is granted to the leadership of the earthly expression of the Church the privilege of giving a word of affirmation and encouragement to the minister.

Ordination establishes one's call with those outside of the Church. The actual ceremony is conducted within the confines of the community of faith, but it speaks to the broader community. The watching world, which is the focus of evangelism and compassion, can be assured that the ordinees have evidenced the divine call on their lives and received the recognition of that from the Church.

Ordination advances the relationship between ordinees and the Church. It has been noted that ministry is, among other descriptors, relational. Expectations from the Church are placed on the ordinees: loyalty, support, fidelity to the faith, proper lifestyle, etc. The ordinees can expect the Church to provide support, mentorship, fellowship, opportunities to advance in ministry, confidentiality, and investment in their lives. Jesus invested Himself in the lives of the Twelve by teaching, training, and engaging in their spiritual growth, and Paul invested himself in Timothy and Titus (and others) by modeling and trusting them with ministry. The Church will need to invest itself in the lives of the ordinees so they can fully carry out the call of God on their lives.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul expressed in his first letter to Timothy so clearly the attitude that denotes the one called to the Christian ministry: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service" (1 Timothy 1:12). Paul continues in this passage to admit personal unworthiness and marvels that "the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly" (1:14). The call to ministry in His church is the expression of His grace and not the result of human effort.

Ordination, then, is the recognition of that grace of God that has marked the candidates, calling them into His service, and evidenced by the candidates' ministry in their area of calling. It is a great privilege to have the Church recognize what God has done in the life of individuals and to come alongside to strengthen each one in their ministry.