

Allen Mawhinney's Ordination

6/1/80

This evening we assemble to ordain Allen Mawhinney to the gospel ministry. For many of us, indeed for all of us, this is a joyful occasion. Yet for some of us it is a time for sadness also. We know that in a few days our brother will be leaving us. Covenant College and the congregation will no longer profit by his services. Nor shall we any longer have the constant pleasure of his presence. We deeply feel our loss however joyful we may be. As a parting act of undeserved grace Allen Mawhinney has asked me to preach the ordination sermon.

Now, every good Trinitarian sermon, like all Gaul, is divided into three parts. However, in order not to delay too greatly the climax of the occasion, this sermon will have only two. Part One aims to state with some precision what the act of ordination is. Part Two will briefly indicate its intended consequences.

Ordination, as everybody knows, makes a man a minister. The ministry is a regular and perpetual ordinance of Christ for the Church. This may seem too obvious to notice, for although we do not ordain men every Lord's Day, ordinations occur with sufficient frequency that all of us are well acquainted with the procedure. However it was not always so. In Reformation times the Erastians considered ministers as government or civil servants, rather than as ministers of Christ, while the Quakers and others abolished the ministry altogether. Since none of these groups are influential today, three passages of Scripture are enough to remind us that the office is of divine origin.

Matt 28:19,20 in Christ's well-known command to his apostles to make disciples of all nations, with the particular promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world." This indicates a perpetual ministry, a ministry that continues to the end of the world.

Eph. 4:11-13 states explicitly that Christ appointed apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Christ's purpose was to build up the Church in the unity of faith and knowledge. Though the apostles have died and though prophets are no more, evangelists and pastors must perpetually obey Christ's instructions.

The Third reference is I Tim 6:14. Its previous context concerns several church offices. The epistle as a whole lays down the principles of church government. Then here near the end of the epistle Paul in summation orders Timothy and his successors to obey these instructions until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the present century and especially in the present place the three verses quoted are sufficient to remind us that the ministry is not optional or temporary, but an obligatory and permanent ordinance of Christ for his Church.

Not only is the ministry a divine ordinance; ordination is essential to induction into the ministry. The Salvation Army and the Anabaptists regard ordination as a useless or even a superstitious rite. Others consider it pragmatically appropriate, but not essential. To show that ordination is essential, it is necessary to point out a distinction. Although we ordain by laying our hands on the candidate, for this is what the apostles did, the laying on of hands is not ordination. The substance, essence, a formal act of ordination is the act by which presbytery invests a man with the power and authority to go forth and preach the gospel. Mark 3:14 tells how Jesus appointed, made, or ordained the twelve to preach the gospel, including in this case authority to cast out demons. Ordination is the bestowal of authority to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments.

Parenthetically one may note that the necessity of ordaining ministers does not preclude private Christian fellowship. There are four interesting verses in I Thess 4:11-14. Verses 12 and 13 request the brethren to pay proper respect to their ministers; but verses 11 and 14, which bracket these two, require the brethren to edify and comfort one another, to admonish the unruly, and to encourage the faint hearted.

But for the preaching of the gospel pastors must be given authority by an act of presbytery. An analogy may be drawn between the church and the civil government. The latter appoints ambassadors and gives them authority. If the church then is to do all things decently and in order, should it not also give authority to its ambassadors? This is more than a chance analogy. Paul himself in II Cor. 5:20 says, "We are ambassadors for Christ." There is also another analogy. In the Gospels, particularly in Luke 16, Jesus uses the analogy of a steward. A steward is an officer, employed by the head of a household, to manage its finances. The steward is an employee. He has been chosen and established in his office by the owner. Now, Paul in Titus 1:7 pictures the minister as a steward of God. In I Cor. 4:1 Paul calls himself a steward of the mysteries of God. And like the Old Testament priests, "No man taketh this honor unto himself" (Heb. 5:4). It is ordination that makes a man a steward of God.

There are other verses showing the necessity of ordination. Romans 10:14,15 reads, “how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher. And how shall they preach except they be sent?” Preachers do not send themselves out to preach. They must be sent. No matter how gifted a man may be, he may not preach except he be sent. The sending is the ordination. It is not election by the people. A people may elect a candidate, but it is the presbytery that sends the candidate to the congregation. In Jerusalem the people chose the deacons, but the apostles ordained them to their office. The ordination is essential.

It should be noted that ordination is not the recognition of a candidate's gifts. The opinion may be a common one, but it is erroneous. Ordination is not a recognition of the candidate's gifts: it is a gift which Presbytery confers. Listen to the clear and unambiguous words of Paul in I Tim 4:14. “Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.” Timothy no doubt had gifts. He was apt to teach. But presbytery gave him another gift – the authority to preach the gospel.

These passages and this discussion do not exhaust the New Testament material. Indeed very little can be said in one sermon. But rather than continue with other positive passages, I shall note two or three places which might seem to say that ordination is unnecessary.

Acts 8:4 informs us that with the increasing persecution in Jerusalem the Christians were scattered abroad and went everywhere preaching the gospel. No ordination seems to have been required. Acts 6:5,6 recounts the election and ordination of Stephen and Phillip as deacons, not as ministers; yet they both preached the gospel. But note that Phillip was not only a deacon, Acts 21:8 expressly calls Phillip an evangelist; and if deacons must be ordained, surely evangelists must. So for the people who were scattered abroad, two circumstances must be noted. First, since those who fled from Jerusalem were numerous, one would expect that some of them were ordained ministers. Then, second, in times of war, persecution, or anarchy, the church organization is likely to be destroyed. This was certainly true in France, and possibly in parts of Scotland. In such extraordinary cases preaching must somehow continue; hence until order can be restored, some unordained men must preach. But such exceptional circumstances cannot be normative for regular, organized, and reformed church government.

I Cor. 16:15 has given rise to another objection. It can be translated, the house of Stephanus appointed themselves deacons for the saints. This is supposed to mean that the men of the household ordained themselves and that therefore no one needs to be ordained by the presbytery. The argument,

however, is so weak, one wonders how anyone could have used it. The translation given above is itself questionable. One might equally well say, the household of Stephanus devoted themselves to serving the saints. With this translation there is no reference either to the diaconate or to ordination. To use this verse against ordination by the church, one would have to show that this better translation is impossible. This cannot be done, and therefore this verse does not overturn the passages requiring presbyterial ordination.

This brief exposition with the answers to some objections is, I am convinced, enough to show that the ordained ministry is a regular and perpetual ordinance of Christ for his church. The second part of this sermon must now consider its purpose and intended consequences.

The New Testament in several places provides some instructions relative to the work of an elder. But the more lengthy and concentrated instruction is found in the pastoral epistles. These letters, addressed specifically to ordained officials, explain in greater detail how ministers, ruling elders, and deacons are to discharge their obligations. Their obligations differ somewhat both in substance and in degree, but there is one obligation that is imposed on all of them. This basic principle is stated in a short phrase that Paul uses three times; namely, “apt to teach.” The teaching elder is eminent in this domain; the ruling elder is less so; but even the deacon must “hold the mystery of the faith ... and [have] great confidence in the faith” (I, 3;13).

The emphasis on teaching the faith permeates these epistles. There is little time in one sermon to give lengthy explanations; but permit me, if you please, to list briefly most of the verses that explicitly refer to teaching. These are hardly sufficient, for the contexts of these verse expand the meaning in less explicit words.

The first verse is I Tim 1:3,4 with its explanation continuing to verse eleven. Here Paul tells Timothy to “instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines.” This is the theme on which the epistle opens; and while Paul states it negatively, no one can miss the importance Paul attaches to true doctrines.

I Tim. 3:2 is the first case of the phrase “apt to teach.” Paul states other qualifications also; but these others are qualities every good Christian should have. The one most applicable to the office is ability to teach.

I Tim. 4:1 is a warning against deceitful doctrines. The phrase is “deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.” As then, so now, it is the duty of the officers of the church to identify clearly the false doctrines that are abroad in our land.

If verse 1 puts it negatively, verse 6 states it both ways, negatively and positively: “In pointing out these things to the brethren you will be ... nourished on the words of faith and of sound doctrine.” Then verse 11 adds, “Proclaim and teach these things.” After which, verse 16 concludes the chapter with “Pay attention ... to the teaching.”

I Tim 5:17 is the well known verse, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in word and doctrine.”

The last chapter of I Tim. With its 21 verses insists, in at least six of them, on teaching and doctrine.

Verse 2: “Teach and preach these things.” Verses 3, 4, and 5; “If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words ... he is conceited and understands nothing ... men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth.”

The command to “instruct” dominates verse 17 and 18. And Paul concludes the epistle with an impassioned exhortation: O timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you ... [against] the opposing argument of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’”

A congregation, even in a service of ordination, might find this recital of verses somewhat tedious. Yet these elementary duties require emphasis at the present time because they are so widely ignored and disobeyed. Doctrine, truth, and knowledge are currently held in low repute, both by those who hold to heretical or non-Christian theories and as well by those who reduce religion to emotion and mysticism. It would be salutary if all the elders, whether they have served for years or are just entering upon their office, would compare themselves with Paul’s idea of a faithful disciple of the Lord. Each should ask himself, am I obeying, or to what extent am I obeying Paul’s commands?

This service tonight is most encouraging because it would be almost impossible to find anyone more apt to teach than the present ordinand. He excels in intellectual ability, without which no substantial contribution to the defense of the faith can be made. This is exceptionally important in this irrationalistic, existential, anti-doctrinal age. On a solid intellectual base alone can be exercised the sagacity and wisdom already delightfully exhibited by this candidate. We are therefore confident of his future usefulness in Christ’s Kingdom.

Although I do not want to bore anyone here in the congregation, yet if I myself am to obey Paul’s commands, it seems necessary at least to run over briefly the eighteen or twenty places in II Timothy which emphasize truth, doctrine, knowledge, and understanding. Permit me to condense

somewhat and run the passages together.

Paul opens the second epistle by claiming to have been chosen as an apostle by the will of God; and in verse 11 he says he was appointed a preacher and teacher of the gospel. For the present purpose it must be pointed out that Paul was not just a teacher, period; he was a teacher of the gospel. The gospel is the truth which he preached. Among fundamentalists

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In verse 13 Paul instructs Timothy to “retain the standard of sound words.” On this verse, permit me a short quotation from Calvin.

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Then Paul goes on to tell Timothy that he must “guard the treasure entrusted to” him. To repeat, he must “be apt to teach ... handling accurately the word of truth. ... [unlike the] “men who have gone astray from the truth.” Then Paul again repeats “apt to teach.” Chapter 3:1-8 is a severe warning against those who are “always learning, yet are never able to come to knowledge of the truth... opposed to the truth, men of depraved mind, reprobate concerning the faith. Timothy must follow Paul’s “teaching,” opposing “imposters ... [who] deceive and are deceived.” Timothy must “continue in the things you have learned.” “Preach the word ... for [some] will not endure sound doctrine,” as for example, “Alexander the coppersmith ... for he vigorously opposed our teaching.

Such is the message of II Timothy. But I omitted the strongest verse of all, did I not? It is II Tim 3:16-17: “All Scripture is inspired of God, and profitable for doctrine ... that the man of God may be completely equipped for every good work.”

If this were another occasion it would be proper, in view of current attacks on the trustworthiness of Scripture, to stress the inerrancy of God’s written revelation. Historically evangelical Christianity has been distinguished by two great doctrines, viz. the inerrancy of Scripture and justification by faith. Even on this occasion, when we ordain a man to his office, we must insist on inerrancy, for otherwise we should have no authority to ordain anyone. We must also insist on it

because Scripture is the material which the candidate must from now on teach and proclaim. But this verse also has a very important application to the elder's method of operation. The verse says that the Scripture is profitable for doctrine in order that the man of God may be completely equipped for every good work. We need no irrational mysticism, nor disturbing emotional experiences nor dare we trust counsellors and advisers. Scripture by itself equips us completely for every, not merely some, but for every good work. Therefore, my respected friend, proclaim its message, let the light of divine truth dispel the doctrines of error and false doctrine, guard the deposit god has given you, pay close attention to yourself and your teaching, and glorify him who is

ὁ μακάριος καὶ μόνος δυνάστης

ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν βασιλευόντων

καὶ κύριος τῶν κυριευόντων

... ᾧ τιμὴ καὶ κράτος αἰώνιον

the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, to Him be honor and eternal dominion – Amen.