

Ordination of Clergy (as Baptists understand "ordination")
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I Corinthians 12: 4-11

There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but they all come from the same Spirit. There are different ways to serve the same Lord, and we can each do different things. Yet the same God works in all of us and helps us in everything we do.

The Spirit has given each of us a special way of serving others. Some of us can speak with wisdom, while others can speak with knowledge, but these gifts come from the same Spirit. To others the Spirit has given great faith or power to heal the sick or the power to work mighty miracles. Some of us are prophets, and some of us recognize when God's Spirit is present. Others can speak different kinds of languages, and still others can tell what these languages mean. But it is the Spirit who does all this and decides which gifts to give each of us. [CEV]

Since many Baptists are confused about what ordination means, I want to help us all understand what one being ordained is doing and why.

I. Three Theological Principles

In Baptist life, ordination is a paradox, and a rite of passage that needs clarification. Historically, there have been three theological principles that have guided Baptist life and shaped how and why we do ordination.

A. Bible Freedom

The first principle is Bible freedom. For Baptist, as for many other denominations, the Bible, under the lordship of Jesus Christ, should be the authority for Christians and churches. And individuals have both the right and the responsibility to study it. Now, this may seem obvious or normal, the right of each individual to read and interpret Scripture on his/her own; but in our early days, when our Catholic brothers and sisters believed that only the priest could correctly interpret Scripture, the idea that anyone could read the word of God was radical, even heretical. If regular folks could read and interpret Scripture, could they also be called by God for ministry? Baptists said, "YES!"

B. Church Freedom

The second principle we have held close is the principle of Church freedom. In Baptist life, each church is autonomous, it has the freedom to determine its membership and leadership, to order its work and worship, and to ordain those – both men and women – they perceive as gifted for ministry.

C. Soul Freedom

Thirdly, Baptist believe in soul freedom. Soul freedom affirms the historic right and responsibility of individuals to come before God without
the imposition of creed,
the intervention of clergy,
or the interference of civil authority.

Again, this was a radical doctrine in the early days. A priest or mediator was not needed to gain access to God. Any individual could speak to God and God could speak to individual hearts. Soul freedom, also called the priesthood of the believer, also held that all persons can and should be ministers – whether they are ordained clergy or lay persons.

II. Three Qualifications

It is this principle, soul freedom or the priesthood of the believer, that has had the most influence on ordination in Baptist life, because it is often the candidate's sense of an inward call that is the first and most crucial step toward ordination. In fact, for many years, an inward call to ministry was sufficient for ministry. But over time, three qualifications have developed for ordination in Baptist life.

A. The Candidate's Perception of a Call

The first continues to be the candidate's perception of a call.

B. The Home Church "Licenses" the Candidate

After someone expresses this call to ministry, the church to which he/she belongs would often license the candidate for ministry. This gave the candidate the opportunity to develop gifts for ministry. It also allowed the church time to observe the candidate and confirm the gifts and calling.

[Many times this happens *informally* when a college or a seminary has an applicant seeking to enter the school as a 'ministerial student.' The school may request a recommendation from that prospective student's home church. This -in effect- becomes a 'licensing' procedure. -R. Boggs]

C. An Outward Call to a Specific Place of Ministry

Finally, in preparation for ordination, candidates needed an outward call to a specific place of ministry. Today candidates are sometimes ordained without this third component in place.

III. The Procedure

In some denominations, ordination occurs at the associational level and the process includes specific educational requirements and exams. In Baptist life, it is the local church that ordains. There is an ordination council composed of either church members or a group of local pastors. They examine the candidate, often asking him/her to write a formal statement of his/her beliefs. Educational requirements vary. If the candidate is affirmed, a service of ordination or setting apart for ministry is scheduled.

[Dover Baptist Association – as with most Virginia Baptist General Association churches – calls a council {or *presbyter* –when only ordained clergy make up the council} to examine a candidate AT THE REQUEST OF THE LOCAL CHURCH. The local church uses this procedure because the local church understands that the ordained one will probably serve several churches during his/her lifetime. This is the ordaining local church seeking out members from sister churches to aid in its responsibility to examine the candidate. This council only gives its RECOMMENDATION to the requesting church following its investigation. The local church may, or may not, follow the recommendation. –R.Boggs]

IV. What Ordination Does and Does Not Do in Baptist Life

Despite this process, paradoxes exist.

If, as Baptists, we believe in the autonomy of the local church,
why have an ordination council made up of pastors from local churches?

If an inward call is sufficient,
why seek the approval of the church?

And finally, if everyone is called to be a minister,
why ordain any one at all?

To answer these questions, we must understand what ordination does and does not do in Baptist life.

A. Does NOT Do

Ordination does not confer or bring grace, spiritual gifts, abilities, power, priestly authority, mysterious virtues, or special rights or privileges.

Additionally, in Baptist life, the church and the council do not possess the authority to ordain –they are instruments *to affirm* Christ's authority. The church and the council have the responsibility of *judging the validity* of the candidate's call.

B. Does Do

So, what does ordination do? It confers authority TO LEAD AND TO SERVE recognizing the full equality of all in the congregation. Some in Baptist life call ordained ministers the first among equals.

ORDINATION IS A RECOGNITION OF GIFTS FOR MINISTRY AND THE SETTING ASIDE AND BLESSING OF A PERSON FOR VOCATIONAL MINISTRY.

In our process, the ordination council serves to promote co-operation among the churches, to help prevent ordination of unworthy candidates, and to assure the acceptance of candidates by all other like-minded Baptist churches. Ordination is significant to the ordaining church, because it has the joy of producing a minister. It also has the responsibility of not acting hastily. Ordination is significant to the church or institution being served by the one being

ordained, because it assures them that the minister's call and qualifications have been carefully considered.

Despite the paradoxes surrounding ordination in our faith tradition, it remains one of the most significant and joyous times in a person's life – celebrated with the laying on of hands and in blessing and affirming the call.

V. Models of Call Found in Scripture

There are many models of call in Scripture, and many responses to God's call. In Jeremiah 1: 5, God tells Jeremiah,

Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.

Jeremiah resisted his call originally, claiming he did not know how to speak.

Samuel was a young boy when God called to him on his bed late in the night. Samuel originally thought it was Eli the priest calling him – he needed Eli's help to know that it was the voice of God.

Isaiah was perhaps the most willing follower. When God said,

Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Isaiah replied,

Here am I, send me.

Mary was just a young teenager when God chose her to be the mother of the Lord. At first, Scripture tells us, she was perplexed and pondered what might God want of her. But, when she understood what she had been called to do, she also said,

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to Your word.

Others were not so young when God called. Moses may have been as much as eighty years old when God called him. And he, too, was very resistant, arguing with God.

Abraham was 75 when God called him to leave his homeland and go. The challenging thing for Abraham was that God didn't even tell him where he was going, he just said:

Go to a place that I will show you.

VI. And, with Us

And so it is with us. Sometimes, God calls at unexpected times in lives to do unexpected things. At any age, with any physical condition, God calls those whom He would call. We commend those who do not let age or physical limitations side-line their pursuit of education and desire to be ordained. We stand with those so called and have been examined and deemed ready

for ordination. We stand with such persons and lay our hands on them in blessing. As we do that, we commit ourselves

to praying for those ones ordained,
to helping them discern God's call,
and to continuing support of their call as God reveals it to them.

For even as ordination begins with the one who heard the call from God, it does not remain there. We are

nurtured in a community,
called out of a community,
and called to other communities.

As representatives of those faith communities, we come to the place of ordination to be faithful to our responsibilities on behalf of those to be ordained.

Some days the ministry, like any other vocation, is just plain hard. There are days of incomparable joy, but there are also days of haunting frustration and pain. There are days of knowing you are absolutely where God wants you to be, and there are days of wondering, "Where is God?" Those ordained are encouraged, during those harder times, to remember the day when God and the faith community affirmed and blessed. Know that God, along with His Presence, sends fellow pilgrims to be with his ordained in their journey.

¹Halbrooks, Thomas. "The Meaning and Significance of Ordination among Southern Baptist." found in *Baptist History and Heritage*. 23 (July 1988): pp. 24-32

²Shurden, Walter B., *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1993.