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ORDINATION

In the next hour (or hopefully a little less) I want to do 4 things:

- 1) Introduce the issue and perhaps set a few records straight.
- 2) Work through the question: Where in the Bible do we find direct guidance on what church leadership should be like?
- 3) Make some direct comments on the so-called "ordination" or "laying-on-of-hands" texts in the New Testament.
- 4) Based on the material presented, suggest some implications for the question of ordination.

I want to begin by referring to this sheet ("Discussion Primer"). It was referred to in a Feb. 17 letter from Marvin Hein as "a summary statement of my message on ordination." That is not what it is. It does not summarize the material I will present. Nor will I be giving a "message on ordination." This discussion primer was intended to get us started thinking about the topic, that is all.

For those who have not read it, this page summarizes what church leaders and scholars are increasingly being led to conclude when they carefully examine the New Testament texts that were once thought to provide a foundation for ordination ceremonies. The majority are concluding that the New Testament provides neither precedent nor mandate for the kinds of ceremonies that we now call "ordination."

We've developed procedures for evaluating and dedicating church leaders for their ministries, called the culminating ceremony an "ordination" and then imagined that something similar must have happened in those New Testament situations where people were commissioned to a task through the laying on of hands. In fact, what was happening back there was quite different from what most of us today understand as ordination.

Of course, it does not necessarily follow that we should not be doing what we are doing. If we are justified in having Sunday School, stewardship committees, church bulletins, publishing houses and study conferences, why not also ceremonies like what we call ordination? ALL OF THESE DEVELOPED WITHIN CHURCH HISTORY. Let's keep the ones that serve us well!

But that is exactly the question. IS IT SERVING US WELL? Are there ways to improve it? Would alternatives be even better?

There is, however, one major difference between "ordination" and these other things I have mentioned . . . Sunday School, church bulletins and publishing houses. The difference is that everyone knows these other things are developments within the history of the church. Everyone knows it is O.K. to re-evaluate these, to re-design them, to re-affirm them or sometimes to replace them. BUT not everyone knows or agrees that "ordination" is also something

that can or should be re-considered. Many people are convinced that it is the right biblical way of commissioning church leaders.

The whole point of this discussion primer is to say . . . it really is O.K. to re-think ordination. If ordination serves us well, let's use it and improve it. If there are better alternatives, let's consider them. It is legitimate to be having this conference, because the biblical texts once thought to define and mandate ordination in fact leave us free to be moved by the Spirit toward whatever consensus serves us best.

If it is true that ordination is not mandated in the Bible, does that mean the Bible is of no use in our discussion? On the contrary! In fact, it means that the whole Bible and not just 2 or 3 disputed texts can enter the discussion.

We can be free to learn from everything God has said and done throughout the ages, as he has gathered a people, and prepared and provided leaders for his people. And I am personally convinced that if we allow the Spirit and the Word to work among us as we together seek to understand what kinds of leaders God has given to his people at different stages in salvation history, we stand a much better chance of actually reaching a consensus on the question of ordination, than if we were to focus on 2 or 3 texts that some people think do refer to an "ordination ceremony" and others think don't.

I want to set another record straight, in case that's needed. If you read this page and concluded that I do not believe in clearly defined visionary leadership, then I miscommunicated. I've learned some things since I first volunteered to gather a group of people to start a mission project. I remember someone asking me then, "Who will lead the group?" and answering, "We are not going to have leadership, we are going to be a fellowship!"

I've learned since then that leadership and fellowship do not exclude each other. On the contrary! I might go so far as to say that the single most important factor making it possible for a church to be healthy and growing is that the church recognizes those people who have leadership gifts and frees them to exercise those gifts with vision and energy.

This conviction has grown and been tested as I've worked both in church leadership and in the development of church leadership in Canada, Scotland, U.S. and Germany. The models may vary . . . but clearly defined leadership, healthy relationships among leaders and between leaders and the rest of the congregation as extremely significant.

I don't see how we can reach consensus about "ordination" without first finding significant consensus on what church leadership is or should be. There are pitfalls in many directions. In some churches everyone wants to lead and in others no one does. In some churches leaders are understood as bosses and in others as slaves. Some churches mistrust everything leaders propose or teach and

others mistake the opinions of some leaders for the Word of God. If we fall into any of these pitfalls, no ceremonies of ordination will help us; nor will we be rescued by discontinuing them.

I believe in effective, clearly defined, visionary, sometimes even aggressive leadership. I have not yet become convinced that ordination procedures and ceremonies as we usually understand them are a safeguard against any of the things that can go wrong between churches and their leaders, or in the lives of the leaders themselves.

I've introduced the issue, at least from my perspective. Now I want to us to think about what church leadership is, and what it is not, from what might well be a new angle. It is my hope that this new angle of vision on the topic will help us more than if I used my time to defend one interpretation of the so-called ordination texts and attack another.

Just so that you know where I am heading, I will not be ending my presentation by arguing that ordination should be retained, NOR that it should be replaced. Instead I'll end by suggesting some things we should seriously consider modifying if we retain ordination, and things we should seriously consider incorporating if we choose to substitute it with other possible forms of leadership discernment, recognition and accountability.

There are surely more important issues on the table these days than the simple question whether we should decide for or against ordination. If we could move closer together in our understanding of church leadership -- if we could agree on the best ways to discern, select and affirm leaders and then hold them accountable while still allowing them to lead -- then we will have made progress on issues much more central and important than narrowly focusing on whether we should put a green light, a red light or an amber light in front of the question of ordination.

I'll focus in on the disputed "ordination" texts later. First I want to ask some questions of the whole Bible.

My first question: Which pastors are referred to by name in the New Testament??? (Any?)

Second: Which other local church leaders are referred to by name in the New Testament??? (Any?)

Third: Which texts in the Bible were written directly to local church leaders??? (Any?) . . . Philemon?

Fourth: Which Old Testament leadership titles or positions are picked up and used to refer to leaders within the New Testament church??? (Any?) . . . elder? pastor? teacher? perhaps!

No part of the Bible is irrelevant to church leaders, but not very many texts are directly about them, or written to them, or directly talk about the role they are to play . . . fewer, I am suggesting,

than most of us imagine. Understanding why this is so (I suggest) can yield surprizingly relevant implications for the topic at hand.

If what I share sounds like it is not about ordination . . . or if it sounds like I wasn't serious when I said I believe in the necessity of visionary leadership, or when I said I believe the whole Bible can help us . . . then stick with me. I think it will become clear that all this has everything to do with ordination . . . AND THAT the biblical necessity of clear, visionary leadership will come in through another door!!

I once picked up a church magazine in Germany with an interesting-sounding title: "Abraham als Vorbild für Gemeindeführer" -- "Abraham as a model for church leaders." I was preparing for a seminar on church leadership at the time, so I eagerly began reading. I read the first page or so and said to myself . . . "Hey, this is great stuff! I can use some of this."

The article pointed to the significant choices Abraham made and the steps of faith he took. It then argued that to be effective church leaders one should learn to do the kinds of things Abraham did. For example, Abraham heard God's call and left his homeland. So also should pastors be quick to leave home and relatives and culture in response to the call of God. Abraham gave Lot the better land. So also should church leaders be ready to give up their claim on material gains in the course of ministering to others. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his only son Isaac. So also should church leaders give up their nearest and dearest, should God's call require it. Abraham prayed earnestly for Sodom and for his relatives there, that God would not destroy them. So also church leaders must stand in the gap and intercede for the salvation of others. Abraham lied when he claimed that Sarah was his sister. So church leaders should be very resourceful . . . but they should not lie!

It was about this far into the article that I started getting suspicious. I asked myself: How does the author of this article know that we should not also learn the following lessons from Abraham?

- that no one should leave home until after their father has died.
- That no one should move into their calling under the age of 75 years.
- That to be an effective minister you should be a farmer and if possible live in a tent.
- That it is good to have a concubine handy, in case child-bearing is a problem.

How did the author know that we should not learn from Abraham on these points? He knew it because he already knew all about church leaders and what they should do and not do before he examined the Abraham story. He had learned about church leaders from experience and from the New Testament. The truth is that he did not learn a single thing from the life of Abraham about what church leaders should be like. He found in Abraham an example of one who responded

to God in many of the ways that God calls New Testament Christians to respond (leaders no more and no less than any other Christians).

But he did not learn any lessons about what church leadership should be like by examining what Abraham did. He already knew about church leadership. He just found that Abraham was a bit like what he knew -- in fact there were enough points of similarity that he almost fooled me into thinking he had learned these points from the Abraham story.

I've begun to suspect that we do something similar far more often than we realize. We see an Old Testament model that impresses us, and then we imagine that this character is teaching us how to be good church leaders. But why did the character impress us? Because he or she was doing the things we believe a church leader should do.

Our standard of judgment came from our experience, or our nature, or our understanding of how leadership works, or perhaps even from specific texts in the New Testament. It did not come from the Old Testament characters that impress us.

I've begun to have serious doubts about how many direct connections we should be drawing between leaders in the Old Testament and those who were called to be leaders of local churches in the New Testament or are called to that task today.

In fact, I'm going to go even farther! I've begun to seriously doubt if even the majority of those New Testament leaders whose lives and ministries inspire us should be viewed as normative models of what it means to provide leadership within a local church. The apostles Peter and John, the deacons Stephen and Philip, the missionaries Paul and Barnabus, the so-called pastors Timothy and Titus (that is not what they were), all these model Christian living and faithfulness to their ministry calling. Their stories inspire us. But these were not called to the role of local church leadership. None aspired to carry it out. Should we not be cautious about assuming that we should be experiencing our call, carrying out our ministries, or defining our roles as if they are our primary models?

I suspect that far less of the Bible is directly about local church leadership than we might imagine. If we understand why and how that is the case, I think we can gain much more clarity about the calling and the gifts and the authority and the accountability that are supposed to be directly related to church leaders. And then we will be in a better position to seek God's wisdom about whether or not ordination helps us, and what might go wrong if we retain it, and what might go wrong if we don't.

Well, I have made some claims that some would perhaps consider surprising. I'd like to share the thoughts that have led me toward these conclusions.

OLD TESTAMENT OFFICES:

Think with me first about those people who provide leadership to the people of God in the Old Testament. Should church leaders think of themselves as the New Testament equivalent?

Take, for example, the patriarchs . . . Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are patriarchs of the Old Testament. Who are the patriarchs of the church? Do we really want to think of church leaders as though they fit that category, especially in the light of Jesus' word, "Do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father and he is in heaven." (Matt. 23:9) Jesus referred often to his spiritual family as his brothers and sisters and mothers. But the word "fathers" is explicitly and deliberately absent even from those lists where the logic of the passage almost requires it. The church is not a patriarchy and church leaders should be very cautious about looking to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to define their role as leaders.

In the Old Testament the patriarchs are followed by a set of leaders we might call "charismatic leaders" . . . people like Moses and Joshua. They are sort of prophets and sort of generals. And although they clearly had qualities that church leaders should also have, their position, their title and their role can hardly be equated with the role of a church leader. Neither the power invested in them, nor the hierarchical nature of the structures they established are transferrable. Even more significant, they were among the very few people of their generation on whom the Spirit descended. In those days the Spirit did not descend on the whole people of God. That is different in the church. A church where only the leaders are thought to be endowed with the Spirit or where only leaders exercise spiritual gifts is not a church as the New Testament describes it. The church needs leaders, but I do not think it needs leaders who think that Moses or Joshua model the way they are to understand their task.

Then came the judges. We would not think of calling our church leaders by such a title. But do we run the risk of pressuring them to act like judges? When Paul says, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?" he meant the church, not its leaders. When he went on to say, "If you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even those of little account in the church" he was hardly referring to local church leaders.

Followers of Jesus are not to be quick to judge. Yet when judgements within local churches must be made (e.g. in matters of church discipline, or in discerning whether a prophecy is of God, or whether a teacher is promoting heresy), then the New Testament norm seems to be that either the apostles made the judgment or else in their absence the local church as a body did so. The final authority never seems to have been any local church leader.

Consider next the Old Testament monarchy. Reluctantly God permitted his people to choose a king. Saul and the kings and queens who came after him introduced all the abuses that God warned his people would come with the monarchy. And yet God used the monarchy in very

significant ways to promote his purposes and especially to clarify the nature of his future coming into the world through the coming King of David's line.

What is the New Testament legacy of the Old Testament kingship? Ultimately the line of kings is fulfilled in Messiah Jesus. But when Jesus calls others to join his reign, he does not put church leaders at his right and left hand. In fact, he rebuked those who understood leadership that way. Rather all the saints are destined to reign with Christ, the leaders no less, but also no more, than the non-leaders.

Alongside the Old Testament leaders such as patriarchs, generals, judges and kings were the priests. Here, if anywhere, we might expect to find parallels to church leaders in the New Testament. But we search for them in vain.

New Testament leaders are never called priests. BUT THE CHURCH AS A WHOLE IS! In fact, we are specifically called a "royal priesthood." The so-called "priesthood of all believers" (a phrase, by the way, which is not found in the Bible) is one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Bible. But probably the most serious mistake we could make would be to take the New Testament texts about priesthood and apply them to church leaders instead of to the whole church. The New Testament calls us to avoid precisely that!

Only one church leader is ever called priest in the New Testament and that is our Great High Priest, Jesus.

We come finally to Old Testament prophets. Here we perhaps imagine most quickly that church leaders find a relevant Old Testament model. Although church leaders can and should do some of the things that Old Testament prophets also did, there are major problems with seeing Old Testament prophets as role models for New Testament church leaders. In fact, they seem not even to be role model for New Testament prophets!

The call of the prophets in the Old Testament came unmediated from God. And so did their message. What that meant was that if the prophet said "YES" and the people said "NO", then the right answer was "YES". The people had no veto power and no mandate to help the prophet discern which parts were from God and which might not have been.

As people, the Old Testament prophets were not infallible. But as spokespersons for God they were. Their prophecies needed to be true and of divine origin 100% of the time. One false prophecy and the prophet was to be stoned.

The fact that the people were inclined to stone the true prophets more often than the false ones, does not change the divine pattern. The prophets were above the people, lifted out from among the people to speak God's message to them. When there was disagreement, the prophets of God were right and the people were wrong.

New Testament church leadership is not like that. Church leaders are called to carry out tasks that range much broader than speaking prophetic words. And even when church leaders speak prophetically, they are doing something very different from what happened in the Old Testament.

In the New Testament a prophet speaks and the church discerns. 100% infallibility was not expected. Nor were people stoned if it was not reached. Moreover, there is no clear connection between prophecy and church leadership in the New Testament. One might well be a church leader and not speak words of prophecy. Likewise one might speak a prophetic word and not be a church leader.

So even the Old Testament prophets do not seem to provide a valid Old Testament model for leaders of New Testament churches, no more in fact than do patriarchs, or charismatic leaders like Moses and Joshua, or judges, or kings, or priests.

Yet all these Old Testament titles have something very important in common: They all point to Jesus and beyond Jesus to the New Testament church.

Jesus was the one fully endowed with the Spirit and therefore the charismatic leader par excellence. In fact, he is referred to as both the New Moses and the New Joshua! Jesus is also the final judge. And he is the King of Kings. He is the one who is a prophet and more than a prophet. He is our great High Priest.

Of all the main Old Testament leadership titles, only that of patriarch is not directly ascribed to Jesus. But significantly it is Jesus alone who truly reveals God as our Father, and that we can be sons and daughters of that one Father through him alone.

The general Old Testament pattern is: God chose Old Testament leaders and lifted them out from among his people. He endowed them with special authority and often special gifts. And every one of them pointed in a unique way to the fulfillment of all Old Testament leadership offices in Jesus Christ.

WHAT NONE OF THESE OLD TESTAMENT LEADERSHIP TITLES DO IS POINT TO NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LEADERS. That does not mean that the titles are discontinued after their fulfillment in Christ. On the contrary, they find a new referent, the church as a whole. Christ fulfills all these titles and roles and offices and then embodies them again, NOT IN CHURCH LEADERS, BUT IN THE WHOLE CHURCH.

The church is a PRIESTHOOD, the church is a ROYAL or KINGLY priesthood, the church is called to JUDGE, the church as a whole is endowed with the SPIRIT and with CHARISMATIC GIFTS.

When the New Testament speaks of the church as a people, it is a people under the rulership of Christ, not under the rulership of human leaders. When the New Testament speaks of the church as an army, it is not human leaders who lead us into battle; it is Christ. And when the church is viewed as a family, our relationship

to the one Father flows through Christ our brother, not through human leaders.

In fact, we could go even further. The whole Old Testament idea of being LIFTED OUT FROM AMONG THE PEOPLE stops with its fulfillment in Christ. Priests were taken out from among the people to mediate between the people and their God. Prophets were called out from among the people to hear God's message and mediate it back to the people. The kings were uniquely adopted as "sons" of God. Moses played the role of one who went to God for the people and then came back and reported what God had said. The people as a whole were afraid to be in conversation with God.

ALL THAT IS FULFILLED IN CHRIST! He is the final mediator. Paul argues that there can now be only one mediator between God and his people, and that is Jesus. Leaders in the church should never think of themselves as mediators between God and the church.

If we wanted, we could stop here and begin working out some applications for the issue of ordination. We could, for example, discuss whether we should expect a call to ministry that is anything like Samuel's or Isaiah's or Jeremiah's. Weren't we all called to ministry when we joined the church?

We could discuss the idea that a preacher's task is to be as much like a prophet as possible, or that it is a counselor's task to be as much like a priest as possible. I think Old Testament leadership offices speak much more directly the question what the church should be than to the question what church leaders should be like.

What this means is that our theology of church leadership, (including how we are called to it, how we are initiated into it, what its goals are, which accountability structures help make it effective, etc.) should not flow directly from Old Testament texts, but rather indirectly from them through a New Testament understanding of the nature of the church.

I am suggesting that we are on slippery footing if we take Old Testament titles, models, roles and positions and then work directly off these to deduce sets of principles that become normative for leadership in the Christian church.

NEW TESTAMENT LEADERS:

But I made an even more surprising suggestion earlier. I suggested that most of the New Testament leaders we read about in Acts and elsewhere provide almost as little material that is directly about local church leaders as the Old Testament does. And that is because most of the leaders we meet in the New Testament were apostles or deacons, missionaries, evangelists, or apostolic representatives. They were not leaders of local churches.

Incidentally: Please note that I refer often to "local church leaders" in my presentation. I do that to avoid the confusion that would be produced if I used the terms "pastors" and "elders." In

modern language these usually refer to two different groups of people. That was not the case in the New Testament. Local churches were led in the New Testament by a team of people variously called pastors, or elders, or bishops. All three titles referred to the same leadership people. So please permit me to simply refer to these as "local church leaders."

My claim is that we are also on slippery ground if we formulated an understanding of ordination (or of local church leadership, for that matter) as if our role were comparable to Peter's or Paul's or, for that matter, Timothy's.

The apostles were not local church leaders, or when they were, for as short a time as possible. Their goal was to transition out of local church leadership as soon as the church was mature enough that they could afford to do so. That is true of the primary apostles like the original 12 (as far as we can tell) and later of Paul. It is also true for another group that we might call secondary apostles, later missionaries and church planters who were also referred to by the term "apostles", but not viewed as comparable to the apostles who founded the church.

The goal of the apostles was to plant churches and then help them become mature enough that apostolic leadership was no longer needed. Mature churches were led by local leaders appointed either by the church or by the apostles who moved on.

It seems these local elders were not given the authority the apostles had had while the churches were being planted. The apostles, at least the primary ones, seem to have had the authority to dictate what must happen within the church. They could appoint leaders. They could even make final decisions binding on the church. Of course, they did it with the authority of Christ and under the guidance of the Spirit. And often they did not exercise the full authority they could have exercised. It was, after all, their goal to lead the church to sufficient maturity that such authoritative leadership from above could be replaced by a completely different kind of leadership from within.

The New Testament often compares the primary apostles of the New Testament church with the prophets of the Old Testament. They were not infallible people, but they were granted the authority to speak directly for God into the situations of the church. If an apostle said "YES" and a congregation said "NO," who was right? The apostles were, although (as I said) they often relinquished their right to exercise that authority. They were committed to helping the church reach a level of maturity which made their authoritative word unnecessary.

Paul, for example, said to the Philippians: "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you." (Phil. 3:15) Paul often knew the judgements that a church should make, but he called on the church to make them.

Old Testament prophets had been, in a sense, under God but over the people. By analogy New Testament apostles (i.e. the primary ones) are under Christ but over the church. But they are not models for local church leaders. In fact, the role of the original apostles was transitional and temporary. They helped make the transition from an Old Testament to a New Testament way of thinking about leadership. They helped make the transition from Jesus to the church, from leadership as office and authority, to leadership as function and servanthood. And because they were transitional, they were not replaced when they died or were martyred.

"Apostle" taken with its secondary meaning of "church-planter" was a continuing ministry in the New Testament and it would not be unbiblical (though it might be dangerous) to retain that word for those who do pioneer missionary work or church planting today.

But even these people are not models for local church leaders. Their goal is to help the church reach the point of maturity where the authority that is inherently theirs as church founders is no longer needed. Then they move on, or if they should decide to stay, they become part of a team of leaders, careful not to be ABOVE the church, but to carry out leadership gifts within it.

Local church leaders who take their primary cues from the apostles run the risk of giving up on the very goal that motivated the apostles, and that is to make themselves dispensable in the local church as soon as possible. Church planters who play an apostolic role after the church is founded consign that church to permanent immaturity.

If the apostles are not models for local church leaders, then neither are the so-called "pastors" Timothy and Titus, to whom the so-called "Pastoral Epistles" were written. The truth is that these epistles should be re-named. Neither Timothy nor Titus were pastors of local churches. Their role was transitional and substitutionary. They were commissioned by the apostle Paul to finish the task of laying a foundation and then appointing leaders who would be accountable to Christ and to the church to carry on the work.

The foundation of the church consists of the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles, with Christ himself as the cornerstone. Church leaders are not part of that foundation. They are stones within the building, helping to build all the other stones into a dwelling place for God.

Leaders of local churches within the New Testament are called pastor/teachers, overseers and elders. They did not see themselves as the foundation stones of the church. Nor did they take a position over the church with the supposed right to say "NO" when the church says "YES". They spoke and the church discerned.

In the New Covenant, Christ has commissioned the whole body to hold each part accountable, not one or two to hold the whole body accountable. All members of the body of Christ are subject to the discernment of the body under Christ. And that is true of pastors

and teachers, elders and overseers.

Those who were ABOVE the people, mediating God's word infallibly and authoritatively regardless how disobedient the people might have been -- these have passed from the scene. Their role was preparatory. Their task is over. Only Christ the cornerstone of the foundation lives on to continue infallibly guiding the church. And so does the Spirit who keeps on taking the Word of the Apostles and Prophets and guiding each generation of believers to interpret it aright and carry on the task Christ began.

The legacy which the prophets and apostles have left the church is not to be found in people who play their authoritative roles, but in the authoritative written Word which God inspired the prophets and apostles to pen. That is the normative canonical legacy which guides the church and its leaders. That is the normative guide that helps us develop church traditions, and re-evaluate them.

When Peter wrote to a church to warn against false teachers and false teachings, he did not point to local church leaders as the normative judges of what is true and false. Instead he said,

"I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Savior through your apostles." (2 Peter 3:2)

The words of the holy prophets -- the command of our Lord -- the traditions and interpretations given by the apostles -- these are the authoritative norms. And these we find embodied not in leaders with the presumed authority to determine truth for the church. These we find in the normative guide of the church, the written Word witnessing to Christ, interpreted by the church under the guidance of the Spirit. And so the whole Bible becomes our guide on what it means to be God's faithful people. And thus, since it is the task of leaders to help the church be that, the whole Bible, Old and New Testament, remains our source of guidance in a way much more powerfully than if we had to rely on 2 or 3 disputed verses on "ordination".

There are churches where it is presumed that only one or two leaders can truly interpret that Word. Indeed there are churches where leaders are almost viewed as authoritative norms alongside the Word. How easily we fall into these traps when we look for the wrong biblical models to help us understand our role as ministers and leaders in the church. And sometimes our ways of understanding ordination contribute to the problem.

One last question before we look directly at the so-called "ordination texts": Is it really true that no Old Testament titles are carried over into the New? Not quite. A few titles like "shepherds" and "elders" and "teachers" are used for leaders of God's people in both Testaments. But isn't it interesting: THESE ARE PRECISELY THOSE OLD TESTAMENT TITLES THAT WERE NOT REALLY TITLES. They are used to describe a ministry, not to label a position. To be an elder in the Old Testament does not focus on

office, but on the maturity needed to provide wise guidance. To be a teacher is not to hold an office with its own rights and authorities, but to be one who is gifted to interpret the Word. The term "shepherd" could be applied in the Old Testament to priests, or to kings, or to prophets -- to almost anyone, because it was not the label for the position these people held, it was a description of a way of contributing to the health and safety and nourishment of God's people.

These are the kinds of terms that are used when referring to leaders within the New Testament church.

SHEPHERD (often translated pastors) focuses primarily on those things shepherds do for sheep: feed, protect from harm, bind up wounds.

ELDER (sometimes translated, or rather transliterated, presbyters) focuses on the wisdom that comes from maturity.

OVERSEER (sometimes translated bishop) focuses on the role of helping to see the larger picture and focus the church's vision.

These are the terms most frequently used in the New Testament to refer to leaders. And all three terms are used to refer to the same leadership people. The terms do not focus on power and authority. They do not focus on position and privilege. They can be linked to many different spiritual gifts and many different kinds of ministries in the church. But together they provide the church with guidance and help as the whole church grows up into Christ who is the head.

In the New Testament leaders are not raised up above the people to take a position between Christ and his church. They operate from within the people of God, helping the church be what God is calling it to be. They exercise gifts of ministry, but their primary task is to order all the other gifted ministers of the church, and that includes every member of the body.

Where then do we find the biblical texts that apply to the leaders of our churches? If we are looking for texts that directly apply, we will not find them in the Old Testament, where leadership functions so different than in the New Testament church. Nor will we find them on those sections of the New Testament that are about missionaries and church planters, apostles and their substitutes.

If we want direct help, we find it in those texts that describe the work of local church leaders called to shepherd the flock, provide the wisdom that comes from maturity, and help focus the church's vision. We find it in texts which portray the role that shepherds / elders / overseers play in the church: guiding, teaching, protecting, inspiring, equipping (cf. Acts 20). We find it in texts that tell us directly what pastor/teachers in the church are called to do: to prepare all God's people for the work of the ministry (cf. Eph. 4).

These texts are not primarily about authority; They do not picture

leaders as being lifted out from among to stand over. The focus is on function and gift. The goal is to order all the other gifts so that the church as a whole can be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a prophetic community, a charismatic ministry team, a healthy growing organism, a loving family.

BUT IF WE WANT TO FIND INDIRECT HELP, the whole Bible becomes our normative guide. It is God's Word to the church, to inspire and instruct the church on what it means to be the people of God in our day. It is the role of church leaders to help the church live up to that high calling.

Leaders are called to serve from within, helping the church be the church. Because there are so few texts in the Bible telling leaders exactly how they should do that, we should conclude that the Spirit wants to guide us to find the best way in each generation and in each culture.

The focus will always be on service, not lordship. It will always be on gifts, not guaranteed rights. It will always be on effective ministry, not position or career. It will always be on empowering the whole church, not on keeping it in check. And (as I read the New Testament) it will always be on working as part of a team.

But beyond that we are given lots of room to find the ways that best help the church to be the church. We can learn from the church growth movement. We can learn from the Vineyard movement. We can learn from the early Anabaptists or the first Mennonite Brethren. We can learn from what is happening in the two thirds world. We can learn from the way the Spirit has guided the church throughout its history, directing and then sometimes re-directing. And we can without fear open up cans of worms by asking questions like: "Should we be ordaining those that are called to lead?"

In the light of all that, what do the texts in the New Testament mean which talk about "laying on of hands"?

THE "ORDINATION" TEXTS:

I Timothy 4:14

Paul writes to his representative Timothy, charged with the task of helping guard a group of house churches against false teachers while also helping them reach maturity so that they can discern godly leaders. He says,

"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you."

Timothy is never referred to as pastor or elder or bishop; he is not a local church leader, but rather an apostolic representative. This text does not mention ordination to an office, but even if it did, it could not be about the ordination to an office in a local church. The mention of a charismatic gift (whatever it was)

suggests that Timothy was commissioned for a task, not granted a position or installed into an office. To build a theology of ordination from this text (as some do) is to build castles in the air.

There is a second "laying on of hands" text in I Timothy. Here it is not about hands being laid on Timothy, but about him doing that to others. We read in I Timothy 5:22 . . .

"Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others."

If this text is about laying hands on leaders (which is by no means certain), then it could mean one of two things: 1) Don't hastily restore a leader who falls into sin; or 2) Be very discerning when choosing leaders, so that those chosen are mature and not especially prone to fall into sin. It is quite possible that the text is in fact not about leadership at all, rather about restoring sinners to the fellowship of the church. Either way the focus is on discernment and affirmation. There is nothing in the text about authority, rights and privileges, titles, lifelong clergy status, or most of the other things we usually associate with laying on hands.

II Timothy 1:6

"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."

The gift referred to here might be a ministry gift, but the context suggests rather that the gift is Timothy's upbringing in the faith which Timothy had personalized. The emphasis is on the work of the Spirit in Timothy's life, and the event referred to is almost certainly Timothy's initiation into the Christian faith. That event was certainly a call into ministry for Timothy, but no more or less than for all other believers, whether they be called to leadership or not.

Then there are a series of other "laying on of hands" texts, particularly in the book of Acts. Some are about commissioning to a particular task (like the so-called deacons of Acts 6), some are about initiation into the Christian faith and the reception of the Spirit, some are about re-direction in ministry, as when two of Antioch's best ministers were let loose by the church (that's the literal translation!) to carry out new ministries in other places.

None are about local church leadership; none are about a lifelong call to fulltime pastoral ministry; none are about status or title. The phrase "laying on of hands" seems to mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes the focus is on commissioning, sometimes on blessing, sometimes on symbolizing or effecting healing or some other spiritual work. The word "ordination" is of course not to be found in the entire New Testament.

What does that mean for us?

I think it means we need a great deal of wisdom from God and patience with each other as we seek to discover together what are the best ways of discerning, selecting, affirming and commissioning those who are gifted and called to lead the church. Should we continue to ordain people? What should ordination mean if we do? Should we change what we do? Call it by another name?

Let me share 13 personal opinions to help get the discussion started:

1. IF we are going to ordain, let us not link ordination to the question whether someone receives a salary from the church. Ordination should be linked to ministry and gifts and roles and responsibilities, not to where ones financial support comes from. That means it should be possible to ordain church moderators and/or so-called "lay preachers".
2. IF we are going to ordain, let us be clear that a call from the church into leadership ministry is at least as valid and trustworthy as a sensed internal call on the part of the one who is to be ordained. That may not have been true of prophets and apostles, but that is quite beside the point.
3. IF we are going to ordain, let us be careful not to think that those ordained are being lifted out from the church to stand above it with the right to pronounce to the church what must be done. By ordaining, we do not give a few leaders the power to dictate directions for the whole church.
4. IF we are going to ordain, let us not think of it as a one-time test of orthodoxy and faithfulness, guaranteeing that the person tested is now beyond the need to be discerned and corrected.
5. IF we are going to ordain, let us not think that the ordination ceremony represents a call to ministry and a gifting for it. Each Christian at the time of baptism (if not sooner) should understand themselves to be gifted for ministry and called to a lifetime of ministry. Ordination may apply to certain ways of ministering, to certain ways of exercising gifts; it does not apply to ministry and gifts per se.
6. IF we are going to ordain, let us not imagine that the people we ordain become substitutes for the people of God, people who go to God for us and then come back and tell us what he says. Christ is the only one ordained to be the mediator of the new covenant.
7. IF we are going to ordain, it should not be viewed as something that gives a lifetime status or title. It should rather be for the duration of a specific ministry.
8. IF we are going to ordain, let us seriously consider changing the name of our ceremonies of ordination to affirmations or commissionings. A new name for our ceremonies would give us more

freedom to re-consider who should be commissioned, for which ministry tasks, and in which way.

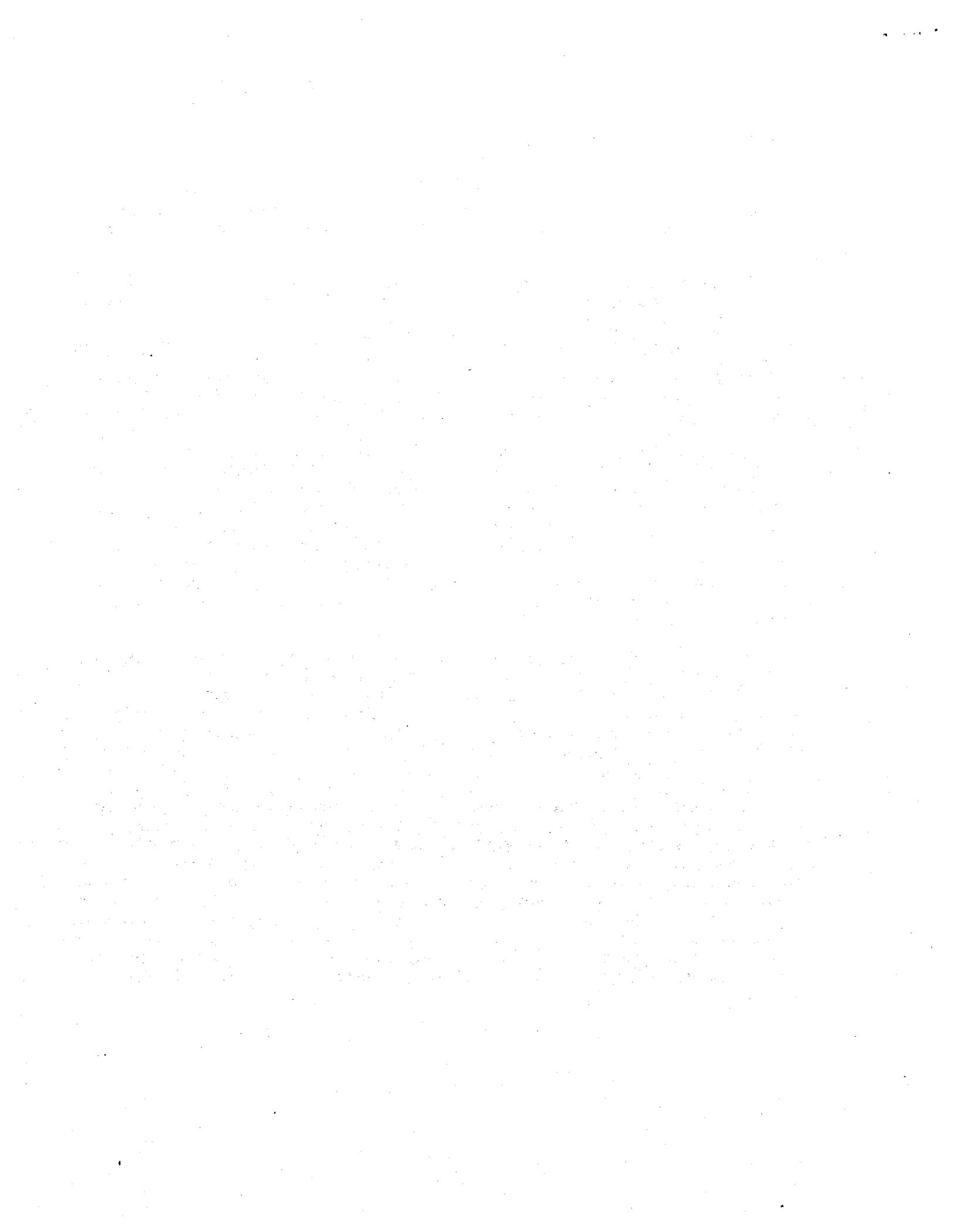
9. IF we are not going to ordain, let us be very careful that we do not stop discerning those people gifts that God gives the church, so that the whole body can be equipped to be ministers and priests.

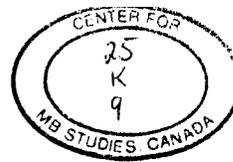
10. IF we are not going to ordain, let us make sure that it is not because we are not willing to submit to each other. Some people think ordination is the solution to individualism. Others think it is one of the main causes of it! I'm not sure who is right. What I am sure of is that individualism is a major threat to the integrity and unity of the church and that whatever decision we make about ordination should be motivated by a desire to learn to mutually submit to Christ, the Head, and (under Him) to each other.

11. If we imagine that our paid staff or our elected officers are the church's only real ministers . . . if we think of pastors or elders or overseers in ways that focus on position more than on faithful service . . . if we think of our leaders as self-accountable, or at least beyond the need to be accountable to the church . . . and if we then use ordination ceremonies to symbolize these views of the church and its leaders, then let us not only stop ordaining; let's start de-frocking . . . for otherwise we might find ourselves ordaining people right out of the positions God put them in.

12. Whatever we choose to do, let us find ways for the church to clearly say that it blesses and commissions people for the tasks of leadership. Let the church find ways of pledging continued willingness to be served and led by these leaders. Then the need to define how much authority a church leader should have will hopefully diminish, maybe even to the low level of priority that the New Testament gives it!

13. If ordination means that we are receiving with joy and thankfulness the leadership gifts God gives to the church, and pledging ourselves to seek with them and with all God's saints the best possible ways of being the church at the end of this century and the beginning of the next, then let us ordain with great celebration and with humble expectancy. And then let us keep in step with the work of the Spirit as energetic, visionary, compassionate and Spirit-filled leaders help the whole church to become an energetic, visionary, compassionate, Spirit-filled body of ministers, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God.





Tim Geddert
January 26, 1994

"Ordination" -- a discussion primer

Biblical and historical perspectives:

Jesus called his followers to be a family in which we are all brothers and sisters and no one plays the role of the "patriarch", a community of servants in which no one seeks personal greatness, and a body in which all members are important and only Christ is "Head." In the church all members are equally important, all are gifted, all are ministers (see esp. Matt. 23:8-12; Rom. 12:3-9). Yet some members of the family, some of the servants, some "body parts" are entrusted with the special responsibility to be "shepherds" / "elders" / "overseers". These are called to administer, to carry out the primary leadership tasks of teaching and equipping, where necessary to act authoritatively on Christ's behalf.

Over the centuries the Christian church has developed ways of discerning, testing, recognizing and empowering those members who become its leading ministers. An "ordination ceremony" (of one kind or another, depending on the tradition) usually culminates that process. Yet the New Testament does not seem to provide any clear precedent, let alone mandate, for such an "ordination".

I. Tim 4:14 (the so-called "ordination" of Timothy) is sometimes thought to provide such a precedent, but this verse links "laying on of hands" with gifting and prophecy, not with authority or office. Furthermore it is unlikely that the "laying on of hands" referred to installed Timothy into any office, and certainly not into the "office" of local church leader. Neither do 1 Tim. 5:22 or 2 Tim. 1:6 provide a clear foundation for the ceremony which the church today calls "ordination". Other New Testament texts use "laying on of hands" language (not "ordination" language) to refer to commissioning/appointing for a task. But the idea of installing into office, setting aside for fulltime ministry, or authorizing for sacred tasks seems absent.

Throughout history the church's "ordination ceremonies" have been understood to mean all these . . . and more. In some traditions they are viewed as prerequisites for administering sacraments or for preaching the Word. In many traditions they are accompanied by special rights and titles and they almost always contribute to hierarchical thinking and to a "clergy" / "laity" split. All of these Jesus and the New Testament seem to have tried to prevent.

Most scholars now recognize that there is a great gulf between the teaching of the New Testament and the practice of the church with respect to "ordination". Some are seeking creative alternatives. Should not we who affirm the giftedness of all believers and who (at least in theory) de-emphasize "sacramentalism" be among those who follow a better path?

Questions for reflection:

What are appropriate biblical ways of recognizing and commissioning those in the church who are called and gifted to lead? Should we dispense with "ordination" language and "ordination ceremonies" altogether (as some have suggested)? Or should we ordain far more people (as others have suggested)? How can we discern and empower some to lead without making them into "clergy" and the others by definition into "laity" (meaning "ignorant/ungifted")? How can we be faithful to what Jesus taught about leadership (e.g. Matt. 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45) and at the same time allow gifted visionary leaders to help the church re-capture the dynamic of the first century church?

TIA

ORDINATION

INTRODUCTION:

- The "Discussion Primer": to get us started thinking!
- Growing consensus: N.T. does not provide precedent nor mandate for the kinds of ceremonies that we now call "ordination."
- The whole Bible, not a few disputed texts, should guide us.
- Where does the Bible give direct guidance for local church leadership?

OLD TESTAMENT LEADERS:

- Anecdote: "Abraham as a model for church leaders"
- Patriarchs, "Charismatic Leaders", Judges, Kings, Priests, Prophets point to Jesus and beyond him to the CHURCH, not to church leaders.
- Old Testament leaders "lifted out from among the people"
- Not so New Testament church leaders.

NEW TESTAMENT LEADERS:

- New Testament "heros" are apostles, deacons, missionaries, evangelists, or apostolic representatives (but not local church leaders)
- Local churches were led by a team of pastors / elders / bishops.
- Primary apostles: official, authoritative and transitional role. These are comparable to O.T. prophets and part of foundation of church.
- Secondary apostles and apostolic representatives are missionaries and church planters, but not models for local church leadership.
- Church's Foundation: Prophets and Apostles with Christ as Cornerstone.
- These normative guides we find today in the Scriptures (cf. 2 Peter 3:2)

O.T. TITLES THAT ARE TAKEN UP TO REFER TO N.T. CHURCH LEADERS

- "Shepherds" "elders" "teachers; the ones that are not titles.
- New Testament leadership "titles" are not really titles.
- SHEPHERDS: focus on feeding, protecting, binding up wounds.
- ELDERS: focuses on the wisdom that comes from maturity.
- OVERSEER: focuses on helping to see the larger picture, focus vision.
- Primary Task: to order all the other gifted ministers of the church.
- The focus is on service, not lordship; gifts, not guaranteed rights; effective ministry, not position or career; empowering the church, not keeping it in check; working as part of a team.
- Beyond that: lots of room for creativity, adapting to a cultural context, learning from those who have found effective methods.

WHAT DO THE "ORDINATION TEXTS" SAY?

- I Timothy 4:14 (written by Paul to his apostolic representative)
 - Not about the role of pastor/elder/bishop; not about office at all.
 - About giftedness and task; no basis for a theology of ordination.
- I Timothy 5:22 (instructing Timothy concerning laying on hands)
 - Perhaps about commissioning; more likely about restoring sinners (not necessarily leaders); about discernment not authority or status.
- II Timothy 1:6 (fan into flame the gift!)
 - "The gift" might be a charismatic endowment, more likely faith.
 - Probably about Timothy's initiation into the Christian faith

Other "laying-on-of-hands" texts:

- Some about commissioning to a task, some about initiation into faith, some about re-direction into a new ministry.
 - None are about local church leadership; none are about a lifelong call to fulltime ministry; none are about status or title.
- The phrase "laying on of hands" seems to mean different things in different contexts. Sometimes the focus is on commissioning, sometimes on blessing, sometimes on symbolizing or effecting healing or some other spiritual work. The word "ordination" is not to be found in the entire New Testament.

SUGGESTIONS (for discussion purposes)

Tim Geddert
April 8, 1994

IF we ARE going to ordain . . .

1. Let us not link ordination to the question whether someone receives a salary from the church.
2. Let us be clear that a call from the church into leadership ministry is at least as valid and trustworthy as a sensed internal call on the part of the one who is to be ordained.
3. Let us be careful not to think that those ordained are being lifted out from among the church to stand above it with the right to pronounce to the church what must be done.
4. Let us not think of it as a one-time test of orthodoxy and faithfulness, guaranteeing that the person tested is now beyond the need to be discerned and corrected.
5. Let us not think that the ordination ceremony represents a call to ministry (per se) and a gifting for ministry. All Christians are called to ministry and gifted for ministry.
6. Let us not imagine that the people we ordain become substitutes for the people of God, people who go to God for us and then come back and tell us what he says.
7. It should not be viewed as something that gives a lifetime status or title.
8. Let us seriously consider changing the name of our ceremonies of ordination to commissionings.

IF we are NOT going to ordain . . .

9. Let us not stop discerning those people gifts that God gives the church, so that the whole body can be equipped to be ministers and priests.
10. Let us make sure that it is not because we are not willing to submit to each other. Whatever decision we make about ordination should be motivated by a desire to learn to mutually submit to Christ, the Head, and (under Him) to each other.

11. If ordination symbolizes that . . .
 - paid staff or elected officers are the church's only ministers
 - ministry is a matter of position more than function or service
 - leaders are beyond the need to be accountable to the church. . . THEN, let us stop ordaining and start "de-frocking".
12. Whatever we choose to do, let us find ways for the church to clearly say that it blesses and commissions people for the tasks of leadership.
13. If ordination means that we are receiving with joy and thankfulness the leadership gifts God gives to the church, and pledging ourselves to seek with them and with all God's saints the best possible ways of being the church, then let us ordain with great celebration and expectancy.