

The Ordained Ministry: a biblical pattern

The Authority of the Ordained Minister

We live in an age where authority counts for little. Equality, an important human rights issue, has become a god. More important, fear of God (in the sense of awe) is all too rare, and that undermines respect for human authority. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that ministers in the church do have authority.

However it is important that ministers are chosen in accordance with the criteria in the Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) and that they are well-trained in Bible knowledge and learning from the wisdom of the church throughout the ages.

Ministerial authority is normally invested through the laying on of hands.

A. The importance of the laying on of hands

The laying on of hands is used in healing or general blessing, but more specifically it is used:

1. To authorise as a representative

So the apostles authorised seven men to take over some of their responsibilities. “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ... They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:3-6).

2. To appoint to task

The church at Antioch, after fasting and prayer, laid hands on Barnabas and Saul as they sent them off on a missionary journey (Acts 13:3).

3. To empower through the Holy Spirit

I was brought up in a rather Protestant context which reacted against any idea of “priests” having special powers. However, the apostles laid their hands on people who had been baptised and they received the fulness and power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17-19; 9:17; 19:6). Timothy was given a spiritual gift through a prophetic message given at his ordination by the laying on of hands. “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you 1 Tim 4:14).

Ordination is not just an outward ceremony. Through it God gives or releases spiritual gifts and power and gives authority.

B. The Importance of Authority

It is important to stress that

1. All Christians are called to mutual submission

Paul writes: “Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21); “Honour one another above yourselves” (Rom 12:10); “Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others” (1 Cor. 10:24); “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others (Php 2:3-4). Peter adds: “... clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’ (1 Peter 5:5-6).

This teaching applies to clergy and ministers as well as churchmembers. In various ways we submit to one another because the New Testament stresses responsibilities rather than rights. So there is a real sense in which church leaders submit to churchmembers. This involves showing love and respect and weighing opinions carefully. It will also include seeking God's will corporately in the context of intercession and listening to God. However

2. Christian Leaders have authority

Paul urges the Thessalonians: "Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other" (1 Thess 5:12-13) and he advises Timothy "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim 4:12).

The writer to the Hebrews similarly urges Christians: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17).

a. They are to teach authoritatively

Paul writes to Titus: "These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you" (Titus 2:15). Similarly he tells Timothy "Command and teach these things." (1 Tim 4:11).

b. They are to command people to obey God

Timothy is to "command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Tim 6:17-18).

c. They are to rebuke

Here are Paul's instructions: "... correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction." (2 Tim 4:2); "rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13); "... Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you." (Titus 2:15).

On the other hand ministers who are proved to be in error are to be rebuked. "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Tim 5:19-20).

d. They are to warn

Titus is to "warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned" (Titus 3:10-11).

e. They are to guard the flock

Paul urges the Ephesian elders "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:28-31).

f. They are to discipline

Very little is recorded of Jesus' explicit teaching about the church. But what is recorded is his teaching about church discipline. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector" (Matt 18:15-17).

g. Christian leaders must exercise Christ-like authority

- They only have authority over matters of clear biblical teaching or issues which benefit/harm the church. They can only advise and urge in other areas.
- They must not be domineering or authoritarian.
- They must act in the Spirit of love
- They must consult and weigh disagreement or criticisms.
- They must not exercise authority in a way which keeps Christians dependent on them.

h. Christian leaders must respond to opposition in a Christ-like way

Here is a checklist for leaders facing opposition

- i. Realise your God-given authority
- ii. Act mercifully

As Paul puts it, "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Tim 2:24-26).
- iii. Examine your motives: do you have a merciful servant heart?
 - are you acting for the glory of God
 - are you acting for the benefit of the church *and its mission*?
 - are you acting for the benefit of your opponents.
- iv. Ensure you have supportive fellowship and advice from inside and/or outside your local church.
- v. Seek counselling for hindrances in yourself like fear and insecurity.
- vi. Battle in prayer, including with others
- vii. Carry out spiritual warfare
- viii. Ensure the church, including the opposition, are taught the relevant biblical material.
- ix. Determine to be a doer of the word.
- x. Carry out godly discipline when required *in order to win the opposition over*.

C. The significance of trans-local Christian leaders

The New Testament recognises trans-local apostolic ministries and much of the Christian Church today recognises that there is a place for senior ministers whose oversight is not limited to one local church. In some churches they are bishops.

There are no ministers today on a level with the 12 apostles but even in New Testament times there were secondary level apostles, e.g. Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7).

It is clear from 1 Cor. 13 that the gifts listed in the letter to the Corinthians have not yet passed away. This will only happen “when perfection comes” when “we shall see face to face” and “know fully, even as I am fully” 1 Cor. 13:8-12). These gifts include “first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues” (1 Cor. 12:28 cf. Eph 4:11-12, which makes it clear that these ministries, including the trans-local ones, are important to the welfare and growth of the church).

The servanthood of the Ordained Minister

We have spoken of the authority of ministers and clergy and, in order to avoid authoritarianism, that needs to be balanced by the New Testament teaching on the servanthood of church leaders. Jesus and the apostles made it clear that:

A. Christian leaders are servants

Jesus taught the disciples that they should not exercise the dominant source of authority which the world does. Rather they are to follow his example as one who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Leaders must be servants (Matt 20:25-28).

Paul adds that ministers must not be quarrelsome or resentful, but kind, gentle and patient, even with those who oppose them, seeking to win them to repentance (2 Tim 2:24-26). Peter writes that ministers must not lord it over the congregation or be self-seeking, but rather eager to serve and showing a good example (1 Peter 5:2-3).

B. Christian leaders share

Church leaders are called to collaborative ministry – to minister in the context of a team. So Paul took Barnabas (Acts 13:2-3) or others (Silas and Judas Barsabbas in Acts 15:22). Also the New Testament regularly refers to there being elders (plural) in churches.

C. Christian leaders delegate

Moses was taught the lesson of delegation in Exodus 18. He was overburdened with the responsibility of making judgments for the people. Jethro his father in law told him to delegate: “Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Have them serve as judges for the people at all times, but have them bring every difficult case to you; the simple cases they can decide themselves. That will make your load lighter, because they will share it with you. If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied” (Ex 18:21-23).

It is possible for ministers to feel so responsible that they try to do everything themselves. They might even lapse into perfectionism. In some case this might be linked with pride and ambition. Both Jesus and the apostles delegated. Jesus delegated to the 12 and the 72. The apostles delegated to the six “deacons” in Acts 6.

Why is delegation important?

a. Delegation prevents exhaustion of the Minister

In Num 11:13-17 Moses said to the Lord: “I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now-- if I have found favour in your eyes-- and do not let me face my own ruin.” The Lord replied that he should choose seventy elders to whom he could delegate. Many ministers have broken down in health because they do not delegate.

b. Delegation prevents the spiritual bankruptcy in the Minister

When a dispute arose over distribution of food to widows the apostles said: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:1-6).

The apostles realised that nothing, not even important church work (which could be delegated) should prevent them meditating upon and ministering the word of God. Many ministers have lost their way spiritually because they have allowed church activity to undermine their spiritual lives

c. Delegation prevents damage to the church

Jethro made an important point to Moses when he said: “What you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out. The work is too heavy for you; you cannot handle it alone” (Ex 18:17-18). Lack of delegation not only wears out the minister, it also damages the congregation.

d. Delegation builds up the church

Jesus did not intend ministers to be omni-competent and to have all the gifts. He gave a team of minister with different gifts which was essential to the welfare and growth of the church (Eph 4:11-16). One minister trying to be an apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher won't get very far. He will suffer and so will the church.

In turn these ministers were called upon to delegate to others (2 Tim 2:2).

e. Delegation expands the church's mission

When Jesus wanted to extend the Kingdom he delegated his mission to the 12 and the 72 (Luke 9:1; 10:1).

The lesson of delegation has been clear in Scripture for thousands of years and yet many ministers ignore it – at their peril and the peril of the congregation.

The Example of the Ordained Minister

Ordained ministry is first and foremost about spirituality. The church leader must minister out of a deep personal relationship with God and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul urges them: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood be on your guard!” (Acts 20:28-31).

1. The Minister as an example to the community

The New Testament requires a Minister to be an example to the flock (John 13:15; 1 Cor. 11:1; Php 3:17) “in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4:12 and in doctrine (1 Time 4:16). S/he must show integrity and seriousness (Titus 2:7) and face suffering without resentment and retaliation (1 Peter 2:21).

The Pastoral Epistles (1 & 2 Timothy and Titus) list the qualifications for elders:

QUALIFICATION FOR ELDERS	REFERENCES
Able to teach	1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9
Blameless (above reproach)	1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6
Disciplined	Titus 1:8
Gentle not violent	1 Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7
Good reputation with outsiders	1 Tim 3:7
Has obedient children	1 Tim 3:4-5; Titus 1:6
Honest	Titus 1:7
Hospitable	1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8
Husband of one wife	1 Tim 3:12
Loves what is good	Titus 1:8
Manages family well	1 Tim 3:4
Not given to drunkenness	1 Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7
Not lover of money	1 Tim 3:3
Not overbearing	Titus 1:7
Not quarrelsome	1 Tim 3:3
Not quick tempered	Titus 1:7
Not recent convert	1 Tim 3:6
Orthodox	Titus 1:9
Respectable	1 Tim 3:2
Self-controlled	1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8
Temperate	1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:7
Upright, holy	Titus 1:8

2. The Minister as a focal point of the community

The New Testament refers to elders and leaders plural but it should be remembered that there primary and secondary level apostles plus what have been called apostolic delegates (Timothy and Titus). Also history and psychology prove that one elder/leader will become primus inter pares (first amongst equals), whether by design or default. The New Testament seems to be pragmatic about patterns of leadership and one will not find just one pattern.

The history of Christendom plus general history and psychology shows that local secular communities tend to seek for and respond to a Minister who is the Persona (Parson) of the parish. We ignore this at our cost.

3. The Minister as a visionary leader of the community

A minister is to discern the way forward for the church and its mission in the context of corporate prayer. The church should be a theocracy – a community which hears and obeys God rather than a democracy – a community which runs on pooled human wisdom. For details advice on how to achieve this see [Hearing God](#).

4. The Minister as a courageous leader of the community

As has often been said, courage does not mean the absence of fear. Paul told the Corinthians that he came to them “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (1 Cor. 2:3). Courage means not giving way to fear. Peter writes: “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened” (1 Pet 3:14).

A minister has to take courage in the Lord and to say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Heb 13:6). S/he is to “be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power” (Eph 6:10). What Paul wrote to the Philippians applies to ministers to: “stand firm in one spirit, contending

as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you” (Phil 1:27). S/he is to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 6:12), not with worldly weapons but with spiritual weapons which “have divine power to demolish strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:4).

© *Tony Higton: see conditions for copying on the [Home Page](#)*

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version® NIV®. Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ . Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.