

What has ordination implied for Reformed Christians, and how might Reformed theologies of ordination inform our current debates about ordination and sexuality?

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From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

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The theology of the Reformation fundamentally reshaped the doctrine of ministry, and the practices surrounding ordination in Reformed churches. In the Roman Catholic as well as the Eastern Orthodox Churches, ordination as a sacrament ritually distinguished one group of people from another within the church. Priests, it was argued, by virtue of an “indelible character” conferred on them through valid ordination in the apostolic succession, were elevated to the role of mediators on behalf of the laity. Especially in their consecration and offering of the sacrifice of the Mass, which was said to “re-present” the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, those holding ordained office were viewed as a special class of members within the Body of Christ.

For the Roman Catholic Church, the unity of the church’s whole ministry is secured by the Bishop of Rome – the Pope – who is the ruler over the whole Church, standing in the place of Christ, and as the successor to St. Peter. Under the Pope, the entire leadership of the church is hierarchically organized, with metropolitans over bishops, bishops over priests, priests over deacons.

A quick glance through our *Book of Confessions* will confirm just how completely the Reformed churches rejected this theology of the ministry. In the first place, they did not recognize a fundamental distinction between priests and the laity. On the contrary, they saw the church as a communion of the faithful who have all been made priests and kings in Christ and are therefore able to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God through Christ. Thus understood, the priesthood includes all believers. This was a crucial insight, because it undercut the

hierarchical understanding of ministry inherited from patristic and medieval times. The priestly work of interceding before God on behalf of others is a common work of the people of God.

If every believer can function as a priest before God, then ordained ministry must not be primarily about such priestly mediation performed by a special class of hierarchs. In the Reformed understanding, ministry is conceived rather as service. Ministers are servants of the Word of God, stewards of the mysteries of God, and shepherds or pastors of the people of God. They are not a separate class of citizens in God's Kingdom, set apart by an indelible mark. They are those who receive a call and are set apart for a special work of leadership in the church, of which they too are simply members. They are set apart for the sake of good order in the church, and no one minister stands "over" another.

Our confessions also explicitly reject the claim of any person to stand in the place of Christ in the church. As the Second Helvetic Confession puts it, "Christ the Lord is, and remains, the only universal pastor, the highest Pontiff before God the Father; and . . . in the Church he himself performs all the duties of a bishop or

pastor, even to the world's end; and therefore does not need a substitute for one who is absent. For Christ is present with his Church, and is its life-giving Head" (5.131).

The call to leadership ultimately comes from God the Holy Spirit. It comes in recognition of the fact that a particular individual is blessed with certain gifts that could be used for the benefit of the broader community and for the glory of God.

In Reformed understandings of ministry, the notion of a call to ministry is crucial. John Calvin and the Reformed Confessions speak of two parts of a call to ministry: the "internal call" or "secret call" that the individual receives from God in his or her conscience, and the "external call" that the candidate receives from the church. In general, far more emphasis is placed on the importance of this latter external call. That is because the Reformers rejected the notion that

anyone could simply appoint himself or herself to leadership in the church. The call to leadership ultimately comes from God the Holy Spirit. It comes in recognition of the fact that a particular individual is blessed with certain gifts that could be used for the benefit of the broader community and for the glory of God.

"Hearing" a call to ministry, therefore, is a complex process of discernment. Faithful discernment involves prayer and obedient discipleship from the candidate, but also thorough examination of that person by the broader church - examination that can culminate in the public recognition of the candidate as a deacon, elder, or minister in ordination. This is why our Book of Order outlines

such a long and complex process of candidacy – especially for those who are to be ordained as Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The many steps in this process allow ample opportunities for both the candidate and the church members who know him or her best to “discern the call.”

It is clear in our confessions that ministry is not a sort of “civil right” of baptism. Not all members of the church are blessed with the particular gifts needed for ordained office. On the other hand, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers would seem to overrule any attempt to consider a particular group of people categorically ineligible for ordained ministry simply because of some aspect of their human identity (such as age, disability, gender, or sexual orientation). If all believers are called into the Body of Christ through baptism, and joined in the royal priesthood, then surely it is possible that the Holy Spirit can raise up ordained leadership from anyone within the Body.

In the process of candidacy and examination that all ordained officers go through, the church’s judicatories rightly consider whether individuals appear to possess gifts for the particular office to which they are to be ordained, and the

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right kind of educational preparation and formation to use their gifts wisely and effectively. The session and presbytery also rightly examine candidates on their moral integrity. We are all aware that scandals involving the church’s leadership can seriously damage its ability to bear witness to the Gospel of Christ in the world. So church leaders must be persons seeking to live lives of earnest and exemplary faithfulness. Finally, the judicatories examine candidates on their

understanding of the faith, since they will be entrusted with the task of instructing others in the faith, and ordained leaders maintain the church’s identity through their use and application of Scripture and the liturgical, confessional, and theological resources handed down from our forebears.

Given the Reformed tradition’s great emphasis on thorough examination and its complex process of discerning God’s call to ministry, it is not surprising that our church order has traditionally entrusted this task to the closest relevant judicatory – to the session in the case of deacons and elders, and to the presbytery in the case of ministers. This makes very good sense, because only those who are closely familiar with a candidate will be in a good position to make sound judgments about the subtler qualities necessary for effective leadership. While church-wide standards for ordination are also demanded and upheld (for example,

an M.Div. degree, knowledge of biblical languages, knowledge of the church's constitution and liturgy as demonstrated in ordination exams), it is hard to judge from a test (or from a great distance) things like a person's holiness of life or earnest obedience to the call of God. These equally important standards require the kind of knowledge that only close and long-term acquaintance can afford.

The Reformed churches slowly came to recognize that the Holy Spirit's call went out to a wider group of people than they originally imagined in the 16th century. Our Scots Confession strongly rejects any kind of ordination of women. In the Scots Confession's view, the mere fact that women are allowed to baptize (under certain very special circumstances) by the Roman Catholic Church provides sufficient proof of the total corruption of the ministries of that church (3.22). But our most recent confession, the Brief Statement of Faith, explicitly affirms that God calls both women and men to all the ministries of the church (10.4).

This expansion of who might be considered for ordination may be an important lesson to remember from our own history. As the Westminster Confession states, "the Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (6.010). As Reformed churches, we have had the experience - always somehow surprising - that the Holy Spirit may have a new thing to say to the church, if only we will listen attentively.