

ORDINATION IN THE ANTE-NICENE FATHERS

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Nowhere in Scripture is there a specific command regarding ordination. The Lord of the Church did not prescribe a particular practice, rite, or ceremony of ordination. Yet the people of God have, throughout the years, ordained their leaders. They have done so for various reasons. Some of those reasons fully accord with the Scripture's teaching on the public ministry. Others don't. This essay will take a closer look both at the practice of ordination and its purpose in the early church, as revealed in the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

The term "ordination"

The KJV translates several different Greek verbs used for the setting apart of individuals for public ministry with the word "ordain," including ποιέω, γίνομαι, χειροτονέω, τίθημι, and καθίστημι. The NIV opts not to translate any of those instances with the word "ordain."

Those who translated the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers chose to use the word "ordain" to describe the actions by which the fathers placed men into church office.

Already by the end of the first century, the Apostolic Fathers were using the term to refer to the church's practice in setting aside people for service. Ignatius, in his epistle to Hero, a deacon of Antioch, describes the work of bishops and includes ordination as one of the tasks assigned to bishops: "Do nothing without the bishops; for they are priests, and you a servant of the priests. They baptize, offer sacrifice, ordain, and lay on hands; but you minister to them, as the holy Stephen did at Jerusalem to James and the presbyters."¹

In his *Against Heresies*, written in 180, Ireneaus used the term to describe what the apostles had done in Acts 6, when they laid hands on the seven deacons chosen by the congregation to care for the widows. "The Nicolaitans are the followers of that Nicolas who was one of the seven first ordained to the diaconate by the apostles."² Ireneaus also used the term in regard to the apostle Matthias being

¹*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. I: Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Electronic version, Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, p 113–114.

²*Ibid*, p 352.

elected to replace Judas in Acts 1, writing, "Judas was deprived [of his office], and cast out, while Matthias was ordained in his place."³ Though there is no mention of a laying on of hands in Acts 1, everyone understood that Matthias had been set aside for special service in the church.

Clement of Alexandria, writing near the turn of the third century, described the Apostle John as ordaining men to serve as bishops.

Listen to a tale, which is not a tale but a narrative, handed down and committed to the custody of memory, about the Apostle John. For when, on the tyrant's death, he returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos, he went away, being invited, to the contiguous territories of the nations, here to appoint bishops, there to set in order whole Churches, there to ordain such as were marked out by the Spirit.⁴

Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, used the term "ordain" to refer to Jesus' work of appointing twelve to be apostles. In *Prescription against Heretics*, written near the beginning of the third century, Tertullian described the apostles as "ordained to be teachers to the Gentiles."⁵ Later, he described the apostles as ones that "the Lord ordained to be masters (or teachers)."⁶ The Scriptures do not provide any description of a ceremony or rite employed with the apostles, but there was recognition that the Savior had set them aside for special service.

Lactantius, writing late in the third century, concurred with the thought expressed by Tertullian. He contended that Jesus had ordained the apostles after his resurrection:

After He had risen again on the third day, He gathered together His apostles, whom fear, at the time of His being laid hold on, had put to flight; and while He sojourned with them forty days, He opened their hearts, interpreted to them the Scripture, which hitherto had been wrapped up in obscurity, ordained and fitted them for the preaching of His word and doctrine, and regulated all things concerning the institutions of the New Testament; and this having been accomplished, a cloud and whirlwind enveloped Him, and caught Him up from the sight of men unto heaven.⁷

The Ante-Nicene Fathers seem to agree that the term "ordain" means to set someone aside for special service in the church even when there was no direct evidence of laying on of hands.

³*Ibid*, 388.

⁴*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. II: p 603.*

⁵*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. III: p 247.*

⁶*Ibid*, page 253.

⁷*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VII: p 301.*

The practice of ordination

While the Lord neither commanded ordination nor prescribed a specific rite of ordination, the early Christian Church, in its freedom, developed a rite. In some places in the writing of the Ante-Nicene Fathers, the instruction regarding the rite of ordination appears simply to be wise counsel regarding carrying out an ordination in good order. In other places, however, the instructions seem to rise to the level of canon law, requiring a particular way of carrying it out.

Cyprian, in the middle of the third century, wrote specific instructions regarding ordination:

For which reason you must diligently observe and keep the practice delivered from divine tradition and apostolic observance, which is also maintained among us, and almost throughout all the provinces; that for the proper celebration of ordinations all the neighboring bishops of the same province should assemble with that people for which a prelate is ordained. And the bishop should be chosen in the presence of the people, who have most fully known the life of each one, and have looked into the doings of each one as respects his habitual conduct.⁸

The phrase “must diligently observe” takes this from the area of Christian freedom and requires something that the Lord has not. It is worth noting that Cyprian wanted the people to participate in the ordination of the bishop who would serve them, because they would have had insight into the man’s habitual conduct.

Other instruction regarding ordination seems to fall under the heading of wise direction regarding an orderly ordination. Hippolytus of Rome, in his writing, *The Apostolic Tradition*, provided an early agenda for ordination. Rather than insisting on a particular rite (and invalidating any other), he offered this direction:

He who is ordained as a bishop, being chosen by all the people, must be irreproachable. When his name is announced and approved, the people will gather on the Lord’s day with the council of elders and the bishops who are present. With the assent of all, the bishops will place their hands on him, with the council of elders standing by, quietly. Everyone will keep silent, praying in their hearts for the descent of the Spirit. After this, one of the bishops present, at the request of all, shall lay his hand upon him who is being ordained bishop, and pray, saying, . . .⁹

The wording sounds like an agenda rather than a command from God or the church, with its “the bishops *will* place their hands on him”

⁸*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. V: p 371.*

⁹Hippolytus of Rome. *The Apostolic Tradition*. Translated by Kevin P. Edgecomb. www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html, chapter 2, verses 1-5

and “everyone *will* keep silent.” Unlike the “*must*” of Cyprian, *The Apostolic Tradition* presents a rite that may be followed for the sake of good order.

The Apostolic Teachings and Constitutions, completed during the second half of the third century, also include instructions regarding ordination. Though these instructions are likely pseudepigraphical (attributed to the apostles), they do offer insight into the common practice of ordination in the early church. Some of the instruction again borders on canon law: “We command that a bishop be ordained by three bishops, or at least by two; but it is not lawful that he be set over you by one; for the testimony of two or three witnesses is more firm and secure.”¹⁰ This rule regarding ordination offered some protection against a presiding bishop ordaining someone who was not fit to serve as bishop. In particular, bishops were not to use their authority to ordain for personal or familial benefit: “A bishop must not gratify his brother, or his son, or any other kinsman, with the episcopal dignity, or ordain whom he pleases; for it is not just to make heirs to episcopacy, and to gratify human affections in divine matters.”¹¹

The Apostolic Tradition (Hippolytus) and *The Apostolic Teachings and Constitutions* set limits on those who were to ordain and who were to be ordained. According to Hippolytus, bishops, elders, and deacons were to be ordained, but confessors, readers, sub-deacons, and healers were not.¹² *The Apostolic Teachings and Constitutions*, however, suggests that sub-deacons would be ordained.¹³ Bishops were to be ordained and they alone were to ordain. “We do not permit presbyters to ordain deacons, or deaconesses, or readers, or ministers, or singers, or porters, but only bishops; for this is the ecclesiastical order and harmony.”¹⁴

Bishops weren’t free to ordain just anywhere; they were limited to their own parishes, as Phileas notes in an epistle to Miletius, bishop of Lycopolis, near the end of the third century: “By them it has been established and settled that it is not lawful for any bishop to celebrate ordinations in other parishes than his own; a law which is exceedingly important and wisely devised.”¹⁵

Bishops weren’t free to ordain just anyone to serve as bishop. They were to honor the clear qualifications for ministry that the Lord had

¹⁰*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VII: p 432.*

¹¹*Ibid*, p 504.

¹²*The Apostolic Tradition*, passim. p 95,97-99.

¹³*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VII: p 492.*

¹⁴*Ibid*, page 429.

¹⁵*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VI: p 163.*

outlined in Scripture. In addition to the characteristics listed in the Pastoral Epistles, there seem to have been additional expectations for those who would be entrusted with such a high office, including age requirements and training, academic and otherwise:

But concerning bishops, we have heard from our Lord, that a pastor who is to be ordained a bishop for the churches in every parish, must be unblameable, unreprouvable, free from all kinds of wickedness common among men, not under fifty years of age; for such a one is in good part youthful disorders, and the slanders of the heathen, as well as the reproaches which are sometimes cast upon many persons by some false brethren. . . . Let him therefore, *if it is possible*, be well educated; *but if he be unlettered, let him at any rate be skillful* in the word, and of competent age. But if in a small parish one advanced in years is not to be found, let some younger person, who has a good report among his neighbors, and is esteemed by them worthy of the office of a bishop,—who has carried himself from his youth meekness and regularity, like a much elder person,—after examination, and a general good report, be ordained in peace.¹⁶

In addition, only those approved and elected by the people were to be ordained. The people played a role in the ordination by testifying to the ordinand's character, by extending him a call (asking him to serve them), and by praying for his ministry. In canons ascribed (probably wrongly) to Hippolytus are these instructions regarding the participation of the people:

A bishop should be elected by all the people, and he should be unimpeachable, as it is written of him in the apostle; in the week in which he is ordained, the whole people should also say, We desire him; and there should be silence in the whole hall, and they should all pray in his behalf, and say, O God, establish him whom Thou hast prepared for us, etc.¹⁷

The purpose of ordination

The ordination practices established by the early Christian church reveal their view of the purpose of ordination. By their practices they meant to impress upon the people of God and the person being ordained the importance of the work of the public ministry. Ordination served to set a person aside for particular service and to remind him to focus on his primary work in preaching and teaching the Word. Cyprian wrote, "No one should appoint any of the clergy and the ministers of God executor or guardian by his will, since every one honored by the divine priesthood, and ordained in the clerical service, ought to

¹⁶*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VII: p 396. (emphasis not mine)*

¹⁷*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. V: p 257.*

serve only the altar and sacrifices, and to have leisure for prayers and supplications."¹⁸ No one was to assume a position for which he had not been set aside, for that was an act of arrogance and also harmed the unity of the church. "If any one of the confessors who is not ordained snatches to himself any such dignity upon account of his confession, let the same person be deprived and rejected; for he is not in such an office, since he has denied the constitution of Christ."¹⁹ Both clergy and people alike were to bear in mind the work assigned, that the man ordained ought to give his full time and attention to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

At the same time, the one ordained should not think the honor bestowed on him gave him the right to do as he wished. Tertullian addressed that in *On Monogamy*: that even the office of honor itself might not flatter itself in anything tending to license, as if on the ground of privilege of position.²⁰ As he recognized the privilege granted him, to serve as a bishop, he was to work all the more faithfully and diligently for the benefit of the people purchased with the blood of the Lamb. Bishops were to ordain others for the sake of serving more people with the gospel of righteousness and life in Christ: "For which reason, O bishop, do thou ordain thy fellow-workers, the laborers for life and for righteousness, such deacons as are pleasing to God, such whom you prove to be worthy among all the people, and such as shall be ready for the necessities of their ministrations."²¹

Ordination neither equipped the person in a distinctive way for the task nor gave him a special character. One might infer from the directions regarding the proper way to ordain that ordination must have risen to the status of a sacrament in the early church and they must have believed that it conferred special gifts. Arguing against that are references to unworthy men being ordained. Cyprian wrote,

For that unworthy persons are sometimes ordained, not according to the will of God, but according to human presumption, and that those things which do not come of a legitimate and righteous ordination are displeasing to God, God Himself manifests by Hosea the prophet, saying, "They have set up for themselves a king, but not by me."²²

Their concern in following a particular practice in ordination seems to have been for the truth of God and the souls of men. They wanted to insure that the good news would be proclaimed by well-

¹⁸*Ibid*, page 367.

¹⁹*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. VII: 493.

²⁰*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. IV: p 69.

²¹*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. VII: p 431.

²²*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. V: p 371.

qualified individuals. They didn't want anyone standing in the way of people hearing the Word of life and through that message being brought to saving faith.

The prayers offered and/or prescribed for ordination support that idea. Hippolytus includes this prayer for a bishop being ordained: "Grant Father, who knows the heart, to your servant whom you chose for the episcopate, that he will feed your holy flock, that he will wear your high priesthood without reproach, serving night and day, incessantly making your face favorable, and offering the gifts of your holy church."²³ The people of God were to offer a similar petition at the ordination of an elder: "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, look upon your servant here, and impart the spirit of grace and the wisdom of elders, that he may help and guide your people with a pure heart."²⁴ *The Apostolic Teachings and Constitutions* includes this prayer for the ordination of a bishop:

Grant by your name, O God, who searches the hearts, that this Your servant, whom You have chosen to be a bishop, may feed Your holy flock, and discharge the office of an high priest to You, and minister to You, unblamably night and day; that he may appease You, and gather together the number of those that shall be saved, and may offer to the You the gifts of Your holy Church.²⁵

Ordination reminded both worker and people of the important mission that the Lord had given to his church on earth—to gather the elect through the preaching of the Word.

The practice of ordination also served the important purpose of assuring the people of the trustworthiness of the message being proclaimed to them. Since the man being ordained had to have demonstrated knowledge of Scripture, commitment to proclaiming the truth, and exemplary character, they could trust his ministry in their midst. That didn't free them from the responsibility of being like the Bereans in comparing the message they heard with the truths revealed in the Scriptures. However, they could begin with the confidence that the Lord had provided them a man of his choosing to serve them with the Word. Cyprian noted that the people's participation in the ordination helped to assure the congregation of the trustworthiness of the messenger. In Acts 6, the people of God came together "surely for this reason, that no unworthy person might creep into the ministry of the altar, or of the office of a priest."²⁶ Additionally, the testimony of two or

²³*The Apostolic Tradition*, chapter 3, verse 4

²⁴*The Apostolic Tradition*, chapter 7, verse 2

²⁵*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. VII: p 482.*

²⁶*Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. V: p 371.*

three bishops (as noted above) offered some encouragement to the people.²⁷ By following a particular practice of ordination, the leaders of the early church wanted to free people from concern about the man serving them with the gospel.

Occasionally, the Ante-Nicene Fathers may have gone too far in that. Their intent was good and honorable. They wanted to assure the people of God of the reliability of the man serving them and the message that he proclaimed. In so doing, however, they spoke more strongly than they needed to speak. They opened the door to a misunderstanding of ordination and its purpose. These words from Tertullian in *Prescription against Heresies* serve as an example:

But if there be any (heresies) which are bold enough to plant themselves in the midst of the apostolic age, that they may thereby seem to have been handed down by the apostles, because they existed in the time of the apostles, we can say: Let them produce the original records of their churches; let them unfold the roll of their bishops, running down in due succession from the beginning in such a manner that [their first] bishop shall be able to show for his ordainer and predecessor some one of the apostles or of apostolic men,—a man, moreover, who continued steadfast with the apostles. For this is the manner in which the apostolic churches transmit their registers: as the church of Smyrna, which records that Polycarp was placed therein by John; as also the church of Rome, which makes Clement to have been ordained in like manner by Peter.²⁸

From the viewpoint of history one can readily see how such a statement was misused. It is entirely possible that Tertullian intended by this statement to establish an apostolic succession and make ordination something other than a human rite. It is also possible, though, that the early church practiced ordination for a far different reason: to assure the people of God. They could be confident that the man serving them with the gospel had been instructed in the truth. They could be certain that the office of the gospel ministry had been conferred on the individual by trustworthy men (in the case of a bishop's ordination) or a trustworthy man (in the case of ordinations performed by a bishop in his parish).

In conclusion

Ask an average layperson today, "What is the purpose of ordination?" and you would likely get several different answers. Some might have no idea at all. A portion would see it as a rite by which a man is

²⁷*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. VII: p 432.

²⁸*Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. III: p 258.

acknowledged as having the requisite gifts, qualifications, training, and call to serve in the ministry of the gospel in a particular place. Others might view it as a way by which special gifts are given to the person ordained, that he might be better prepared for the work being asked of him.

Ultimately, the rite of ordination serves best when it does these three things: 1) Reminds the man being ordained of the important work that has been given to him by God through a congregation that has called him to serve on their behalf and for their benefit; 2) Teaches the calling body that the man called needs to devote his time and energy to the ministry of the Word and that they have the responsibility of supporting him; and 3) Assures the calling body that the man before them has the requisite skills, training, and character to serve them well and is worthy of their trust.

The fathers of the early church understood that. They may not have written as clearly about ordination as they might have. Their writings could certainly be used to argue for ordination as a divine rite and to establish apostolic succession. That doesn't mean, however, that they were wrong in their intention. They ordained carefully because of their love of the truth of God and their concern for the people of God. Ordination served a noble purpose for the people of the early church: it assured them of the trustworthiness of the man called to serve them as he began his ministry in their midst.