

Faith Pulpit

Planning the Ordination Service

If the Bible gives little information on how formal ordination took place in the early church, it tells even less about what a formal ordination service should contain. However, as previously demonstrated, ordination is a function of the local church. Whatever other elements may be included in an ordination service, at the least it provides an occasion for the church to take official action to ordain one of its members. Further, because this service is part of the normal activities of the gathered church,¹ it should include the Biblically mandated elements of church gatherings, such as singing, praying, Scripture reading, and preaching. “To conduct an ordination service which in any way obscures the worship event is to cheapen the occasion and denigrate the nature of Christian ministry.”²

Though evidence for an “ordination service” as practiced today is not found specifically in Scripture, dedicating all or part of a service to such an event could well have been practiced. No concrete evidence can be generated to suggest that the ecclesiastical officers of the primitive church were inaugurated in any particular fashion or ceremony. This is not to suggest that elders and deacons were just announced without formal installation. The same diverse vocabulary that suggests absence of specific ceremony probably implies some public act of recognition and consecration.³

In other words, even without references to a specific service, the Bible contains at least some suggestion of a formal occasion of setting leaders apart for ministry. Similarly, John Hammett notes, “[Formal] recognition of leaders fits with the admonition to do all things decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40).”⁴

Within this framework of a basic church service, individual churches have a degree of liberty in planning ordination services. Edward Hiscox, while of the opinion that the early church may not have had formal ceremonies to set apart men for pastoral ministry, nevertheless concludes “that if such ordination or recognition services be held, their form and order are matters of liberty and choice with

those concerned in them, since they are prescribed by no Scriptural authority.”⁵

Practical Suggestions

Advance planning is crucial to a smoothly run service. It is wise for a church to designate someone other than the candidate to coordinate the ordination council and service planning. However, the one planning the service should consult the candidate in designing the service by asking his input on the hymns sung, the ministry of music presented, and the Scripture passage(s) read. In particular the candidate will probably prefer to recommend the author for the service. The ordination service provides opportunities for several authors to participate, so the candidate may wish to invite one of his former pastors, youth pastors, professors, or other godly mentors to speak.

The ease of desktop publishing allows churches to customize materials for the ordination service. For example, a church can prepare custom-printed ordination certificates⁶ and ordination service bulletins. Also, a printed order of service separate from the bulletin provides a simple way to keep participants informed.

Sometimes the ordination service takes place on the day of the examination council. While this may make for efficient planning, it can limit the council’s freedom to recommend that the church postpone ordination if significant doctrinal or personal issues arise. Rather, it is better for a church to allow some time between the council and the service at least on the following day, perhaps in the following weeks or months.

A Suggested Order of Service

Churches have a good deal of freedom in the order of events for an ordination service. With this in mind, here is one suggested plan, with commentary.⁷

Invocation

The pastor of the ordaining church (if he is not the one being ordained) or another minister may deliver the invocation.

Hymn

The online version of this article (faith.edu) contains a list of suggested ordination hymns.

Scripture Reading Many passages of Scripture are appropriate for an ordination service, such as 2 Corinthians 4; 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:3-16; and 1 Peter 4:1, 5:11. Alternately, the candidate may wish to assemble a series of passages significant to his own life and ministry. Involving the congregation through a responsive reading allows for greater corporate participation in the service.⁸

Council Recommendation to the Church

At this point the council moderator or other council representative reads the formal action taken by the council to recommend that the church proceed in ordaining the candidate.

Action of the Church on the Recommendation The pastor or other church representative asks for formal church action to accept the council's recommendation and ordain the candidate to the gospel ministry. Alternately, as part of the vote to call the council the church may have previously moved to ordain the man pending the recommendation of the council.

Hymn Ministry of Music

The candidate may have a particular request for the music performed and the groups or individuals who participate in the service.

Charge to the Church

This author will primarily advise the church on its responsibilities to the newly ordained man. It has been traditional to have a separate ordination sermon to present the Biblical basis of ordination. If a church chooses not to have this separate sermon, the author delivering the charge to the church could also cover that topic. In cases where the ordained man will not continue to serve at that particular church (such as a missionary or other man being sent forth from the church), a charge to the candidate from the pastor of the ordaining church could be substituted.

Charge to the Candidate This sermon provides an occasion for another ordained man who has been influential in the candidate's life to remind him of the solemn privileges and responsibilities accompanying ordination.

Laying On of Hands and Ordination Prayer "The actual act of ordination [in the New Testament] consisted of the laying on of hands."⁹ This is in many ways the central moment of the service, the part with the clearest Biblical precedent. The New Testament presents various groups as performing this function: elders (1 Tim. 4:14), Paul (2 Tim. 1:6), the apostles (Acts 6:6) and prophets and teachers (Acts 13:1–3). Robert Saucy comments, "In each instance the act of ordination was performed by the leaders of the church acting on behalf of the church itself, indicating that the church as a whole is the final ordaining body through which the Holy Spirit directs in the appointment of ministries."¹⁰ Any other pastoral staff members of the church would certainly participate in this part of the service. Many times the invitation will also be extended to other examination council members or ordained men present at the service. The pastor or one of the authors then prays and asks for God's blessing on the newly ordained man.