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A Short History of Ordination (Part I)

by Darius Jankiewicz

With few exceptions, most contemporary Christians consider ordination a legitimate rite of setting selected members apart for the purpose of pastoral ministry and oversight in the Christian Church. It is also generally assumed that the rite finds its foundations in the Old and New Testaments. While this is correct, it is also true that the modern rite of ordination, as, for example, practiced by Seventh-day Adventists, does not find its exact equivalent in the Scriptures; nor do we find a New Testament requirement that such a rite should take place when selected members are asked to fulfill the office of elder. All this raises the question: from where do we get our way of understanding and practicing ordination? In this first part I will explore the etymology of the word “ordination” and then briefly address the evolution of the rite within Christianity during the second century. In the next essay, the second part will briefly touch on third and fourth century developments.

Origin of the Word and Concept of Ordination



The modern term “ordination” comes from the Latin *ordo* (order, class, rank), and its derivative *ordinatio* appears to refer in ancient Rome to installment or induction, appointment or accession to rank. [i] It is well attested historically that pagan Roman society was ranked according to various strictly separated classes, which were called “orders” (from the Latin plural *ordines*).[ii] The historical evidence points out that already during the early phase of the Roman Empire’s existence (second century BC), society had evolved into three basic orders. Thus historians speak of an *ordo senatorum* – the highest class, *ordo equester* (the knights), and plebs—the lowest class of the society. It was eventually accepted that within Roman

society there was *ordo et plebs*, i.e., the higher class of citizens and the lower class.[iii] If, by any chance, a person was destined to move upward in rank, he was to go through the process of *ordinatio*. Thus, in *Historia Augusta*, it is stated that Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121-180 AD) would never ordain anyone to senatorial rank whom he did not know personally.[iv] *Ordinatio* appears to have also been used as a classical way of installing imperial officers. Roman historian Seutonius (ca. 69-ca. 122 AD) reports therefore that, at one point of his rule, Emperor Domitian (51-96 AD) decided to ordain Mettius Rufus as prefect of Egypt. [v] At other times *ordinatio* was also used to promote officers to a higher rank in the army. [vi] Finally, the idea of ordination appears to have also been used in the cultic context of pagan Roman Society. Here, a person would be appointed to the cultic office received from the gods of the ancient world.[vii] All this suggests that when the word *ordinatio* was used in the ancient world, it clearly indicated a movement upward in rank and status.[viii] Once a man was ordained, he held some kind of office that not only separated him from ordinary people but also allowed him to exercise governmental, jurisdictional, or cultic authority that demanded submission of others. Through the work of second-century Christian writers, and especially the writings of Latin apologist Tertullian (ca. 160-ca. 220 AD), these concepts and ideas seeped into the Christian psyche. Eventually, the post-Constantinian Church wholeheartedly embraced the ways in which the Roman Empire was governed and adapted the structures of the latter to its own needs.

Tertullian was a brilliant Christian writer and apologist who saw his main task as defending Christianity against both heretical and pagan attacks. In his zeal to defend the Christian faith and to show its reasonableness, he incorporated

common words found in daily usage among the people of his time. The plethora of nouns and verbs Tertullian introduced into Christian vocabulary also includes *ordo* and *ordinatio*.^[ix] Being intimately familiar with the way in which the Roman Empire was run, Tertullian apparently had no qualms applying these words to Christian ministry as he understood them.^[x] For him the ministry in the church performed functions analogous to the senatorial *ordo* of the city of Rome.^[xi] What happened to Christian ministry during the post-Apostolic era that made the use of the terms *order* and *ordinatio* so enticing for Tertullian?

Evolution of the Ministry and Ordination: Part 1

Christianity of the second and third centuries found itself under much pressure, both external and internal: persecutions, schisms and the rise of heresies ravaged the early Christianity. One response to these stressors was to consolidate all power and authority in the church in the hands of its leadership. While this is already evident in such early Christian writings as *1 Clement* and *Didache*, both dating to early second century, the real impetus in this direction was provided by an early church thinker, Ignatius of Antioch (~110-130AD). A man dedicated to the cause of unity, Ignatius strived to elevate the authority of the bishop in the congregation. It is in his writings that we find the prescription that only one bishop is to govern each church (known as mon-episcopate), surrounded by the council of presbyters and deacons. He is the first church thinker, thus, who presents a bishop as the undisputed head of the congregation, surrounded by a council of presbyters as well as deacons, who, in Ignatian writings, appear to be at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder. “Let the bishop preside in the place of God,” he wrote,” and his clergy in place of the Apostolic conclave, and let my special friends the deacons be entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ.”^[xii] Obedience to the bishop was equal to obedience to God, whom the former represented.

Later in the century, building on the Ignatian understanding of ministry, Irenaeus developed the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, a doctrine that continues to lie at the foundations of Roman Catholicism today. This doctrine places Christian bishops in a chain of succession linked directly with the Apostles and aimed at preserving the pure teaching handed down by them. As one can expect, a side effect of the theory of apostolic succession that it not only strengthened the episcopal organization of the Church against heresy, but also elevated the position and authority of the bishop to a higher level than ever before.^[xiii] Another interesting element found in Irenaeus’ writings relates to the special spiritual endowment that Christian bishops receive as they enter the chain of apostolic succession and known as *charisma veritatis certum* (the certain gift truth) which, Irenaeus believed, allowed bishops to distinguish truth from error. Together with apostolic succession, Irenaeus believed, such teachings protected church unity and the integrity of its teachings. These teachings clearly separated clergy from the rest of the church by endowing them with higher rank and honor.

It is into this kind of theological environment that Tertullian introduced the loaded word *ordinatio*. While nowhere in his writings is the laying-on-of-hands referred to, it is reasonable to assume that both Irenaeus and Tertullian were familiar with the rite and that was how the ministry was installed into office during their times. Both of these thinkers, thus, lay the foundation for the rite of the laying-on-of-hands to become one of the most important Christian rites, a rite that separated clergy from laity through an invisible ontological, or essential, barrier.^[xiv] This barrier placed ministers on a higher spiritual level than the rest of the believers and endowed them with rank, status, and authority that clearly did not belong to the Christian ministry during New Testament times.^[xv] In the second part we will briefly explore the developments of the third and fourth centuries as well as draw some conclusions.

[i]Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1918), 129; *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 31; Catherine Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2007), 86.

[ii]Frederik van Boddie, *Disputatio Historico-Juridica Inauguralis: De Nobilitate* (Apud viduam M. Cyfveer, 1823), 8-18; cf., A. H. J. Greenidge, *Roman Public Life* (London: MacMillan, 1922), 107-113, 224-225, 398-405; William E. Dunstan, *Ancient Rome* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), 102-103, 334.

[iii]P. M. Gy, “Notes on the Early Terminology of Christian Priesthood,” in *The Sacrament of Holy Orders* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1957), 99; Giambattista Vico, *Universal Right* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi B V, 2000), 140; Edward

Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroads, 1981) 39; Joseph Ratzinger, “The Pastoral Implications of Episcopal Collegiality – 1965,” in *Readings in Church Authority: Gifts and Challenges for Contemporary Catholicism*, ed. Gerard Mannion (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), 164; cf., Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of The Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1988), 114-115.

[iv]The exact phrase reads: *nec quemquam in ordinem legit, nisi quem ipse bene scisset*. *Historia Augusta*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 159.

[v]The exact phrase reads: *cur sibi visum esset ordinatione proxima Aegypto praeficere Mettium Rufum* (“why he should next ordain Mettius Rufus prefect of Egypt”). Seutonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 326-327. Aelius Lampridius also appears to use the term in this way, with reference to the appointment of the consuls and procurators. The exact phrases read: *ubi aliquos voluisset vel rectores provinciis dare vel paepositos facere vel procurators. . . ordinare* (“whenever [Alexander] desired to appoint any man governor or a province or appoint him a procurator”). “Life of the Alexander Severus” in *The Scriptorum Historiae Augustae* (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1947), 270; cf., Otto Hirschfeld, *Die Kaiserlichen Verwaltungsbeamten: Bis Auf Diocletian* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1963), 443; Hezser, 86; Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire*, vol. 4 (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1928), 53.

[vi]The author of *Historia Augusta* reports that prior to becoming a Roman Emperor, Publius Helvius Pertinax (126-193 AD) sought to be ordained to a command in the ranks. *Historia Augusta*, vol. I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 315. The exact phrase reads: *ducendi ordinis dignitarem petiit* (“he sought an appointment to a command in the ranks”).

[vii]In one of the interesting anomalies of ancient literature, the Latin word *ordinatio* found its way into the writings of Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus. Thoroughly familiar with Roman civic and cultic life, Epictetus imports this Latin word into the Greek language and endows it with cultic importance. See Epictetus, *The Discourses* (London: William Heinemann, 1928), 222. It must be noted, however, that since religion and culture were intimately connected in the ancient world, the cultic meaning of *ordinatio* in some way extended to all orders of society. Thus, higher orders were endowed with more important religious duties.

[viii]The authors of the official Roman Catholic Catechism thus express a universally accepted fact when they write: “The word *order* in Roman antiquity designated an established civil body, especially a governing body. *Ordinatio* means incorporation into an *ordo*.” See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [paragraph 1537](Liguori: Liguori Publications, 1994), 384.

[ix]Tertullian uses these words with specific reference to the ministry in the church. See his *On Prescriptions Against Heretics* 41, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed., Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1989), 3:263, henceforth *ANF*; *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7 (*ANF* 2:54).

[x]Osborne, 115; Pierre van Beneden, *Aux origines d'une terminologie sacramentelle: Ordo, ordinare, ordinatio dans la littérature chrétienne avant 313* (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1974), 12; Karl-Heinrich Bieritz, *Liturgik* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 173. Being himself a lawyer and teaching law prior to becoming a Christian, Tertullian must have been keenly aware of the close relationship between the way society was governed and its religion. As a Christian apologist, he saw parallels between Rome and Christianity and thus had no qualms about using Roman governmental structures and applying it to Christianity. Cf., Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, “The Synoptic Gospels in the Ancient Church,” in *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship*, ed. Robert L. Thomas, F. David Farnell (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 51.

[xi]Gy, 99.

[xii]Ignatius *Magnesian* 6.4, in Staniforth, 88.

[xiii]Robert Lee Williams, *Bishop Lists: Formation of Apostolic Succession of Bishops in Ecclesiastical Crises* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005), 132-133.

[xiv]Benedict J. Groesche, *A Priest Forever: The Life of Father Eugene Hamilton* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1998),

185-186.

[xv]A Catholic writer, Francis Sullivan, readily acknowledges that “the historical episcopate developed in the post-New Testament period.” Sullivan, 217. For an extended discussion on the episcopal office and powers, see *Lumen Gentium* 20-27 (in Abbott, 39-52)



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Posted by [David Hamstra](#) on April 05, 2013 in [Adventist Ministry and Ordination](#), [Church History](#), [Historical Theology](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Darius too quickly ignores Scripture and jumps to Latin Christian usage of the term "ordinatio." But they didn't do so in a vacuum. They knew the Old Testament background of setting people apart for ministry by laying on of hands. They knew about the Biblical practices of laying on of hands--and the gift that was given by the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands (2 Tim. 1:6). They knew about orders of ministry--Apostles, Episkopoi, Presbyteroi, Diakonoi. These, I think, are critical omissions.

Posted by: [Bill Cork](#) | [April 10, 2013 at 07:21 AM](#)

Thanks for your thoughts Bill. I am aware of all the points you listed. In my larger paper upon which this essay is based I do address the Old Testament background of laying on of hands and its occurrences in the New Testament. In this short blog entry I wanted to concentrate only on the post-Apostolic developments. I believe someone else will be dealing with the issues you addressed in these series on ordination. Thanks again for your comment.

Posted by: [Darius Jankiewicz](#) | [April 10, 2013 at 09:13 PM](#)

How does one get access to the original (larger) papers from which this series of blog articles are excerpted?

Posted by: [Jim Hamstra](#) | [April 20, 2013 at 09:46 AM](#)

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