

**The Biblical, Theological, Historical, and
Cultural Perspective of Ordination**

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Ordination

This position paper on ordination was prepared to help our Georgia Baptist churches better understand the meaning and practice of ordination from a biblical, theological, historical, and cultural perspective. The Administration Committee enlisted the assistance of several Georgia Baptist Convention pastors to study ordination as it relates to our Southern Baptist and Georgia Baptists churches and prepare a paper that would inform and educate our churches. The paper was approved by the Administration Committee and the Executive Committee and was approved by the Georgia Baptist Convention at its 2020 annual meeting.

It is hoped that this position paper will better educate Georgia Baptist churches on the purpose and practice of ordination and lead to a deeper understanding of its significance to the local church and the denomination. To that end the paper will be made available on the Georgia Baptist Mission Board website for the benefit of Georgia Baptist Convention churches.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning and purpose of the practice of ordination with a particular focus on the practice of ordination among Southern Baptists. The working definition of ordination that we will use is “the public recognition by a local church for Gospel ministry of persons who have demonstrated in ways that have satisfied the membership of the local church that this person has been called to Gospel ministry and is ready to pursue Gospel ministry in a local church.” This definition is very general, very broad and very full of questions! Here are some of the questions: what is the nature and character of Gospel ministry? Are there proper biblical boundaries that need to be in place in order to bring clarity to the definition of Gospel ministry? Is more precision needed for clarifying who should be considered a candidate for ordination? And there are other questions that will come to you as you look at this definition. Our goal in this paper is to look at this very general definition in the following contexts: Biblical Teaching, Theological Understanding, Historical Context

and Cultural Considerations. We will conclude our study by offering some practical implications that emerge for us as a result of our study. Our study will focus only on the office of “pastor” or those who serve in a “pastoral function.” We will not be looking at the ordination of deacons.

We do assume but need to state at the beginning that ordination is a good and right practice for the church. Those who are called to Gospel Ministry in and through a local church need to be set apart by the local church that is responsible for sending the person into Gospel Ministry. Our purpose is to explore ordination and what it symbolizes under four headings: Biblical Foundations, Theological Reflections, Historical Context and Cultural Considerations.

Biblical Foundations

I was in a conversation some years ago with a leader among Southern Baptists at the time. He said to me after it had become clear that the conservative resurgence had been successful, we have settled for our denomination for now the question of the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible as our source of authority, but there is another battle yet to be fought: the battle over the sufficiency of Scripture. Do we really believe that the Bible is sufficient for the questions we ask in relationship to our faith and our practice? Do we?

We will begin our examination moving in rapid pace and painting with a wide brush beginning in the Old Testament and then moving to the New Testament. We will examine the Old Testament as the book of promise and the New Testament as the book of fulfillment. We will treat the Old Testament as that collection of thirty-nine books that must be understood in the light of what it anticipates from the beginning that comes to fullness in the “The Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us,” (John 1:14). Our operating presupposition is that all of the Bible finds its fullness and fulfillment in Jesus who is The Way, The Truth and The Life and substantiates in every way the absolute truth of the Old Testament. In other words, the whole Bible points to Jesus and Jesus points us to the whole Bible. So, we need both Testaments to understand what our one Bible would say to us about this issue of ordination.

One way to approach the Bible in relationship to the issue of ordination is to look at three

functions and offices that are found in three persons in the Old Testament that come to fullness and fulfillment in Jesus. The three functions that are at the same time offices are prophet, priest, and king. The three persons are Moses, Aaron, and David. Each is called to serve God in different functions that express offices that each holds. And each of them is a shadow of what comes to full light in the life and ministry of Jesus. But even the shadow sheds light on the question of ordination.

We begin with Moses the leader of the people of Israel choosing men to come alongside him to help him. He was the sole leader of the people having Aaron alone as his helper. He needed more help so with the help of his father-in-law he chose men to join him in the work of leading his people, (Exodus 18:13-27). What is recorded for us in Exodus 18 is laid down in the first chapter of Deuteronomy as a solid foundation for the leadership of the people of God (Deuteronomy 1:9-18). This final book of the first five books of the Bible shares kinship with the New Testament Book of Acts. It lays down for us some basic principles for the people of God. And the first one found in the first chapter of this book is the principle of the right kind of leadership. What is emphasized is the character of the leaders and the number of the leaders: who they are to be as persons and that they are to be more than one. This is Moses who will announce, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from among your brothers, it is to Him you shall listen just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly . . ." Deut. 18:15-16. Moses as anointed of the Spirit of God was pointing beyond Himself to the true and genuine prophet of God who not only brings to His people the Word of God but is in Himself that Word who is at the same time the chief cornerstone of His church built upon the sure and certain foundation of the apostles and the prophets. What Moses gives us as the prophet of God is that those who serve in spiritual leadership giving oversight to God's people are to embody certain character qualities and to join others in leading the people of God. The community or "church" over which God rules and reigns is neither an autocracy ruled by one nor a democracy ruled by many. It is an "assembly" or a "congregation" led by those who embody the kind of character and experience the kind of call that is confirmed by the assembly that endorses their leadership. If you and I peek beyond the period of

Moses into the time of the church, don't we see that what is required of those who lead the people of God under the Old Covenant is basically the same as what is required for those who lead the people of God under the New Covenant?

Let's move from Moses to Aaron, from the prophet to the priest and thus to Exodus 28-29. We are post-Sinai here (Exodus 19-20). The orders for the people of God in order for their life together to be properly ordered has been given. What remains beyond Exodus 20 is an extensive section of teaching about how they are to live out the Word of God in their world (Exodus 21-24), which is followed by instructions about the construction of the Tabernacle and the consecration of the priests (28-29). What we see in these chapters is not only the first mention of the priesthood since the mysterious Melchizedek (Genesis 15) but also the clear communication that these men are called by God, commissioned by God to serve Him and His people. They are committed to the service to which God has called them and are consecrated in a very carefully constructed service of ordination for the office of the priesthood and the functions that are to be fulfilled in the office. What is seen here in the priesthood is what is also seen in the spiritual leaders set apart by Moses: they are to hold an office in which and through which specific functions given by God are to be fulfilled. The word that is used here that is often translated by the word "ordain" means to "to set apart as holy," or "to consecrate." These men are appointed by God and anointed of God to represent the people to God and God to the people. They belong to God to do what God commands. Their work is to be done in compliance with and conformity to His Word. They do not get to decide as Nadab and Abihu found out how best to do for whatever reason what they have been called of God to do (Leviticus 10:1-2). Their ministry as ordained priests is to be done in obedience to the Word of God so as to bring the way of God to the people, and to bring the concerns and cares of the people to God. They stand between God and the people, the people and God. They are mediators of the holy presence of God to a sinful people.

What we learn from the ordained priests of the Old Testament is the sacred nature and character of the office. The office they hold and the function they serve are simple reminders to

us who live and work under the New Covenant of the sacred character of the special call and commission that is given to each one of us who has the privilege to serve in the ministry of the Gospel. They do not provide for us, however, any kind of prescriptive pattern for ministry since all that they were and did is not fulfilled in the pastoral or priestly office but in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:1-5:10). Jesus is greater by far than Moses or Aaron. He is the one to whom the entire priestly system points and He is in His majestic priesthood the perfect manifestation of all that was reflected in the mysterious Melchizedek. Jesus is our priest. He is our great high priest so that the priestly system of Israel points us to Jesus who fulfills for us in every way what is required for someone to bring God to us and us to God. He is the one and exclusive mediator between God and us, and us and God (2 Timothy 2:1-7).

The prophetic function and office finds its focus, fullness, and fulfillment in Jesus. The priestly function and office finds its focus, fullness, and fulfillment in Jesus. So does the office of the king embodied most fully during the days of the Old Covenant in David. He was that king who ruled over the kingdom that God gave him but he did so in the light of a particular promise given to him by God, "your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever," 2 Samuel 7:16. God fulfilled this particular promise to David in the coming of the Son of David born from the lineage of the house of David as the flowering full fruit of the root of David. Jesus is the King who fulfills fully, faithfully and forever the promise given to David. He holds that office from eternity past and forever and functions as the true King of Israel, the sovereign ruler over all the earth and the true King over His Kingdom which for now is present in power in and through His church. It is no strange irony that the Gospel most set on making sure that we know that Jesus is the Son of David is the Gospel that records for us the announcement of Jesus about the coming of the church over which He is King and Lord (Matthew 16:13-20). Jesus fulfills in His coming what was promised to David as He embodies and expresses the essence of whom He is as King ruling over His kingdom found in the world among all those who hear His call and answer it by following Him.

This church that was announced by Jesus would come to birth in the most real sense and in the most real way following the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:1-11). The Holy Spirit coming to those few gathered on the day of Pentecost would launch the people of God into a mission of gathering for growing in the grace and knowledge of God through worship and study together that would then send them into the world as evangelists to announce the Gospel and to call people to repentance and faith in Jesus. This church consists in one sense of all born-again, blood-bought believers all over the world but is known best to us as local assemblies in specific locations that gather on the Lord's Day and at other times designated by each local assembly to worship God and to learn together the Word of God so that we can then go into our world where we live and work as faithful witnesses to the Gospel. But does the New Testament give us any help about how these local assemblies of believers are to be organized that can help us with this question of ordination?

Jesus proclaimed the coming of the church. The church was born at Pentecost. Her early days of foundation and formation were in Jerusalem. She was led in those early days primarily by Peter, James and John. What we know is that these men were faithful in teaching the Word of God, caring for the people of God, and doing the work of evangelism and discipleship (Acts 2:42-47). These men faced intense resistance from the Jewish religious leaders. They had to deal with conflict that came (Acts 5-6) and persecution that would begin to scatter the church from Jerusalem through Samaria and into Gentile regions. What was at first predominantly a Jewish congregation would come to be in Antioch a multi-ethnic gathering of saints (Acts 11:19ff.) and it is from this church that would come the first missionaries/church planters who would be used of God to advance the Gospel from the Jewish world into the Gentile world (Acts 13ff.). Paul and Barnabas would be sent out from this church in Antioch to proclaim the Gospel and to plant churches all over the Gentile world. God was doing His work in saving sinners and in forming churches and those anointed and appointed for leadership would lead these churches. What we observe at the end of the first missionary journey becomes it seems a pattern for the church throughout the world (Acts 14:19-23). Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas having reached as far as Derbe began a reverse trip

stopping in each place where they had evangelized and made disciples as they made their way back to Antioch. Luke is very clear in communicating to us what they did in each place (Acts 14:22-23). They did what we would call discipleship in each town, particularly encouraging the church since they had discovered that living in the world, as a disciple is difficult and demanding. And they appointed (literally they laid their hands on) elders in each church. The word that is use here is from this point consistently the term that is used for the spiritual leaders of the church. It is term that has to do more with office than function. Other terms are used in the New Testament for the function of the office. The two terms used most frequently for the function of the office are “pastor” and “overseer.” The one who holds the office of “elder” serves in that office under the Lordship of Jesus and the authority of Scripture as one who cares for the church like a shepherd cares for his sheep or as one who looks after or gives oversight to those in the church who have been given to him. This practice of appointing elders (office) who serve as pastors and overseers (function) becomes a paradigm for what happens in terms of leadership in the church throughout the time recorded for us in the New Testament.

What I want to do then based on this practice of Paul on his first missionary journey is to present an overview of four texts that can help us to see who the primary leaders of the early church were upon whom the apostles laid their hands or to use our terminology, who were ordained for Gospel ministry. I need to be clear first that I believe that the laying on of the hands as recorded in Acts 14 is an official action of these churches who through Paul and Barnabas were recognizing persons for the pastoral office serving pastoral functions in the church, and second that the texts I am choosing for the overview that follows are simply illustrative of what is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Here are the four texts that I will examine: Acts 20:17-38, Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 14-16 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. I will use the terminology that is used in the ESV but will unpack the terms used in light of their meanings in the Greek language.

Acts 20:17-38. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and from there to Rome. He has come to Miletus from where he sends for the elders of Ephesus. These are the men who are appointed to

be the spiritual leaders of this church. The word for elders (presbuteros) is plural while the word for church (ekklesia) is singular. The church in Ephesus is led by men who serve the church as elders (Acts 20:17). This term is used consistently in the New Testament for their office. They are elders. The term takes us back to the Old Testament and the function of elders in the spiritual leadership of the people of God. Paul speaks to them about who he had been among them (his character and conduct) and what he had taught them (20:18-21). He then tells them where he is going and what he is facing as the context for telling them what they most need for their leadership in the church (20:22-27). He speaks to them simply and strategically about whom they are to be and what they are to do (20:28). He calls them first to “pay attention.” It is a word that means, “to give heed,” with our idea of listening up and looking closely. We would do well to listen and to look. We should as leaders first and foremost pay attention to ourselves, to our own souls, to the nurture of our own lives, which is the source from which we give oversight to the flock, which Jesus bought with His blood for which we are called to care. Paul uses here the two terms as he speaks to these elders that have to do with the function of these men. The first term is translated “overseer” (episkopos) and means to “give oversight to the church.” And the second term that is used here is translated “care for” (poimenas) which employs shepherd imagery for the one who is a pastor. The pastor/elder gives oversight to the church by caring for the people in the way that a shepherd cares for his sheep. The elder or pastor (office) fulfills his office by leading the church in a way that makes clear to the church that he cares for those who are in the church (function). Paul tells the Elders from the church in Ephesus how he did this among them (20:29-35). He protected the church through faithful preaching and teaching in the Word of God, he did not covet anything from them but worked hard to provide for them everything that they needed to be faithful in following Jesus giving particular attention to those who were weak and struggling so as to help them grow and mature as followers of Jesus.

Paul speaks here to those whom he as the apostle of the churches he planted had appointed these anointed men as elders/pastors who are in the manner of a shepherd caring for the sheep to

give oversight to the church over which they are given charge as pastors.

Ephesians 4:11-16. Paul gathers the elders from the church in Ephesus at Miletus before he makes his way to Jerusalem and then to Rome and now we turn to the letter that he wrote to the church in Ephesus. This letter like most of his letters first lays down a solid doctrinal foundation (1-3) before turning to how that doctrine shapes life in the church (4-6). I think it can be shown that the focus for Paul in this practical section of Ephesians is the glory of God. He begins this practical part of the letter by showing how glory to God in the church is manifest in three very distinctively practical ways. First, he wants us to see how the glory of God is displayed in the church before the world in the unity of the church (4:1-6). He then turns secondly to the glory of God being displayed in the gifting of the church (4:7-10). And then thirdly he turns to the glory of God being displayed in the functioning of the church (4:11-16). How the church functions matters to Paul because it matters to God in the display of His glory in and through the church.

Paul shows us that the display of the glory of God in the functioning of the church is first and fundamentally tied to leadership, 4:11. Now I could stop here and get bogged down in the weeds of what he means by apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but I won't because it all leads for him to the last group that he calls pastor/teachers. The pastor/teacher seems to be given three assignments here. We have already seen the meaning for the word for "pastors" here; it is the word for "shepherd" or "one who cares for the flock." The Pastor is to be a teacher who first equips the saints. He gives the saints what is needed through the Word of God for the work of ministry. But secondly he leads them in this work. He is among them as one who leads the way in doing the work of ministry. He is a servant who leads the saints by serving among them. He speaks the Word of God as a teacher and embodies the Word of God as a servant and the outcome thirdly is the building up of the body of Christ as through his teaching and his living, he is leading the church toward maturity. The pastor/teacher functions as a leader when he teaches the word of God to the people of God but then expresses the truth of what He teaches in who he is as a person. His way of living is not disconnected from what he teaches. He gives himself to being what he is declaring.

This combination for the leader in the church is explosive. It is what God uses, expressing the truth of God and then embodying by example that truth, to build up the church so that the church can grow toward increasing unity as a body.

1 Timothy 3. Paul identifies here what he knows as the two offices of a local church; the overseer or the pastor or bishop, and the deacon. Although he is dealing here with these two offices, his focus in what he shares is not at all about what they are to do, but who they are to be. He outlines character qualities for both the pastor and the deacon. And the character qualities seem to address as much function as office. They seem to address the kind of people who are needed in order to do the work that needs to be done.

Many commentators have noted that what is so extraordinary about the character qualities that are listed here is that there is nothing extraordinary here! What is asked of the pastor in terms of who he is to be is no more and no less than what is asked of any and every follower of Jesus. What is highlighted here is the connection between leadership in the church and in the home, the respect that this person has in the larger community, and that he is equipped with the kind of knowledge of the Word of God that would enable him to teach. What is most important here, however, is not what Paul proclaims about who the pastor is to be, but why for the sake of the church the issue is of such immense importance. That issue is focused for us in 1 Timothy 3:15.

He wants us to know how we are to conduct ourselves in the church as a part of the household of faith since the church is the pillar and bulwark of the truth. How we behave in the church has to do here with the issue of the nature and character of those who are our spiritual leaders, which gets to the core of the question of ordination. Who are to be the called out among the called of God to give leadership to the church of the living God? Who are those people whom God calls to serve as elders (office) to give oversight as pastors to the church of the living God over which Jesus is Lord (function)?

1 Peter 5:1-5. This text could be one of the most critical texts in the Bible in addressing the question of ordination. Peter is an apostle and he speaks here as an apostle who also identifies

himself as a fellow elder (1 Peter 5:1). He acknowledges that he is writing in a time of transition. The first leaders of the first churches were the apostles who then through the ministry and mission primarily of Paul and his companions began to transfer leadership of the church to elders. Here we have a pattern not of hierarchical power but of biblical fidelity and ecclesiastical simplicity. Leadership in the earliest days was through the apostles not because of who they were but whose they were as those who were by the command and commission of Jesus to carry on His work. It would thus be faithful to whom He is and to what He calls us as His church that His church be led by faithful men anointed of the Holy Spirit and appointed by the apostles in the context of the choices of the local church. We see this pattern here. Peter an apostle now joining with other elders and out of his knowledge and experience passing on what they need as leaders.

He speaks in the imperative mood in verse 2: “shepherd the sheep of God among you giving oversight.” The word for “elder” in verse one is the same term that we find in Acts 14. It is the term used for office. These men are not apostles; they are elders. This is their office. What follows is the term “shepherd” or literally what we most often translate as “pastor.” The office is “elder.” The function is “pastor.” Pastor pastors. What has happened by the time we get all the way to where we are in our day is that “office” and “function” have merged. Many of our SBC churches do not use the term “elder” but employ the term “pastor” for both the office of the spiritual leader(s) of the church and the function of that office. And then comes another functional term that only becomes an official term for an office very late in the first century and into later centuries but in the New Testament the word “bishop” (episkopos) is functional. It is whom we are as pastors who pastor. We give oversight to the sheep. We care for the church. We preach. We teach. We love. We listen. We live among the sheep so that we know one bleat from another and more blemishes than we care to know.

Then Peter tells us how we as pastors are to go about our oversight that is given to us in our pastoral office. He shows us the lure of the world and the flesh and contrasts that with the way of the man of God under the authority of the Word of God, (2-4). He concludes this short section by

making clear what every man must have and without which no man can be a pastor or function as a pastor: we must be covered over and covered up with the clothing of humility, 5:5.

Augustine reminds us that the Old Testament is in the New Testament revealed while the New Testament is in the Old Testament concealed. It is all of one piece. The two testaments are not disjointed. They are not in conflict but complementary. The latter completes the former as fulfillment to promise. What we see in both is clear testimony to the necessity of leadership among the people of God. What we see is that some are set apart from others as called of God and commissioned by God to lead His people. What we see is that what makes these persons distinctive is not something about them but everything about God. It is the nature and character of God to call those that are weak to confound the strong. What we see is that God does not lead His people by any form of dictatorial autocracy or popular democracy. God raises up a plurality of persons to lead His people. What we see is that there is a position among the people of God that serves a purpose that rises to such a place of prominence that God is very precise and particular about those who serve in this position. It is not for the proud or those who desire prominence. It is not for those who want to rule or who crave recognition. It is for those who are meek and lowly of heart. It is for the humble. It is the position that we call pastor. It is for men only. Strange isn't it, that the gender most prone to pride is the gender called out by God to the kind of humility that can produce that kind of person that God will set apart by His anointing and the church will set apart by her appointing to serve for the glory of God among the people of God. Those who are biblically the candidates for ordination by the local church are those men who having been called of God with that call confirmed by the church are set apart by the local church to serve the church for the glory of God in the office of elder to fulfill the function of pastor or "bishop" as one who through the priority of the preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the practice of the lifestyle of a servant in his home and among the church will be able to lead the "church of the living God which is the pillar and bulwark of the truth," Ephesians 4:15. Not all who serve in a church in what we call staff positions should be ordained. To follow the flow of Scripture to recognize that the restrictions on the candidates for ordination is not a cultural

issue but a biblical issue. Ultimately, the issue is the authority and the sufficiency of Scripture.

Theological Reflections

I will offer here three reflections based on the foundation of what the Bible says about who is the one or ones to be ordained as those called of God to lead the people of God. All three reflections will revolve around the nature and character of the church. The first set of reflections will be about the nature and character of the church generally. The second set of reflections will be about the nature and character of the church from our particular perspective as Southern Baptists. And the third set of reflections will be about what changes may need to be made in relationship to ordination in order to protect biblically and theologically the nature and character of the church.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century struggled to define the church in the light of the massive movement of God during that time that caused the church to recover the Gospel of Jesus Christ and with it the essence of what constitutes a church. What first had to be recognized was that there were and are and always will be true churches and false churches. And then among the true churches there are those who are simply more pure than are others. The goal of any Spirit/Word driven, Gospel-preaching, Jesus-exalting and God-glorifying church is to pursue purity through biblical fidelity. It was to this end that the Reformers arrived at a simple definition of a church as that place where the Gospel is rightly preached and what we call as Baptists the ordinances were rightly administered. Baptists would add in time the practice of church discipline and some of our Baptist brothers and sisters would even add foot washing! The goal though was to be a church that was as faithful to the Word of God in being who we are called to be and doing what we are called to do. Biblical fidelity marked by theological integrity lived out in the world without cultural accommodation is a clear mark of a true church pursuing purity before God.

The problem is that we can too easily and so quickly lose our focus. One of the most well-known historians of the Reformation, Merle d'Aubigne noted that what too often happens over time is not the increase of light from the Word of God flowing into the church, but the decrease. The

torch of Scripture he would say begins to flicker in the winds of the force of human authorities who for whatever and any number of reasons begin to want to adjust a little here and accommodate a little there and sooner than later the light of the Word of God has grown dim. D. Martyn-Lloyd Jones says that error is not always believing and doing the wrong things as much as it is not believing and not doing the right things. The point is vigilance. Watch. Biblical fidelity must be revisited and reestablished in at least each and every generation. To think that we can reach any period and have settled forever the question of basic biblical inerrancy and sufficiency is to misunderstand both the history of the church and also our own depravity. Take this thought with you as we move to reflect on the nature and character of the church in our own denomination.

Our commonly held confession of faith is the Baptist Faith and Message. It has been over time through several revisions. We operate now under the Baptist Faith and Message, 2000. The first article is on "The Scriptures." The last line reads, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." That is a revision from 1963. Read that same article in the 1963 version: "Jesus Christ is the criterion for the interpretation of Scripture." The difference is huge. The latter is a "liberal loophole." It allows a person to separate Paul from Jesus. What happens is that a person develops a perspective on Jesus as one who was welcoming to everyone no matter his or her station in life and use that as the criterion for interpreting whether homosexuality or cohabitation is a sin? We could cite numbers of Pauline passages which would make no difference to this person since all Scripture is to be interpreted by way of the criterion of Jesus. It opened the door wide to liberalism continuing because each person gets to define who Jesus is, it is Marcion revisited but far worse. And before we knew what happened, this way of seeing, reading, and understanding the Bible was rampant from seminary classrooms to Sunday School gatherings. What did we do? We did the right thing. We came back in 2000 and corrected an error so that the loophole is removed. The church/denomination moved more in the direction of purity. We examined our position and pulled our position back into closer conformity to clear biblical fidelity.

We made very clear that what the Bible teaches is absolute truth that is embodied and

expressed in Jesus and who Jesus is and what Jesus says confirms every Word of Scripture. There is no division between the Word written and the Word become flesh. What we say about Scripture then in BFM 2000 is and must be the foundation for what we say about the office and function of pastoral ministry, the scriptural offices of the church are “pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

This leads me to my third and final reflection. It is very clear biblically and theologically that ordination is not for all who lead in the church, even for all who lead as a part of the staff of a church. Ordination should be reserved for those who serve in a pastoral capacity. This means biblically that their office is as an elder or pastor. The function of that office is primarily the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, the oversight of the church family or a segment of the church family, and the care of souls for whom the pastor has responsibility. It is equally clear both biblically and theologically that this office and its functions has been assigned to men. Thus, ordination should be for men who having been called of God to Gospel ministry have had that call confirmed by the leaders of a local church and are thus responsibly commission the man who is called to the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in and through a local church. The persons to be ordained are men. The purpose for the ordination is to set a man apart for the pastoral ministry, which at its center is the preaching and teaching of the Word of God.

The biblical foundations which form the bedrock for the theological reflections make clear that the ordination of people to an office whose function is to serve the church in the preaching and teaching of the Word of God in the context of giving pastoral oversight to the church is a biblically faithful and theologically proper practice of the local church. This pastoral office for those who function in the ministry of the Word belongs to men only. This means, of course, that if we follow the flow of Scripture and the theological understanding that flows from Scripture that only men can be ordained. So, where does this understanding leave us in relationship to the many godly women who serve us faithfully in positions of leadership in our churches? Our next two sections of

this paper that give attention first to historical considerations and then to cultural concerns will help to give us a more full context for this question, and help form the framework for the final section which will focus our attention on practical implications. What we want to emphasize from our study to this point and highlight in the next two sections is that the biblical teaching and theological understanding of ordination for men only, and only then those men who are called of God to serve in pastoral office that serve pastoral functions does not in any way minimize the vital role of women serving in ministry capacities in the church. What we want to show, however, is the historical and cultural context in which the issue of ordination and particularly as it relates to women has been addressed. What we want to highlight is the return again and again to the local autonomy of the local church.

Historical Context

The historical and cultural context for women in ministry in Baptist life is a source of great encouragement lined with great diversity. We will look first at the historical background and then turn to the cultural context. The two are related but not the same. That is why it is important to look first at the one and then the other. It is important, moreover that both be examined honestly and fairly, and thus correctly. First, let's look at the historical context of women serving in some kind of leadership role as we see it in Scripture.

Women serving in leadership in Baptist life does not begin with the formation of the SBC in 1845. It begins with Baptist beginnings all the way back to the 1600's. Two main groups of Baptists formed the focus for the flow of Baptist influence in America. They came to be known historically as "General Baptists" and "Particular Baptists." We will not get into all the details of what each group believed and practiced since that would not be pertinent to our project, but it is important to take note of how each had its own path for seeing how people came to faith in Jesus. The General Baptists tended to be much more liberal and inclusive while the Particular Baptists tended to be much more conservative and exclusive. What held the two groups together in their differences though was their

clear and strong commitment to the autonomy of each local church. This commitment resulted in local church practices that differed one from another. What remained common was the clear and strong commitment to local church autonomy.

The difference of views of how people come to faith in Jesus continues to exist even in our day both among Southern Baptists and Georgia Baptists. What has been consistent and clear even in the differences has been the commitment to the autonomy of the local church. This reality has been treasured even when it comes to the issue of ordination, even in relationship to the ordination of women.

What Scripture makes clear is that God has always raised up women as a vital part of His work in the world. Look at the role that Miriam had alongside Moses and Aaron (Exodus 15:20, Micah 6:4) or Deborah who served as a prophet of God during the days of the Judges (Judges 4:4). Huldah also served God in the prophetic role (2 Kings 22:14ff.). When we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament we encounter Mary Magdalene telling the disciples about the “first good news,” (Matthew 28:8f.), we meet the women in the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:5), the four daughters of Phillip who were prophesying (Acts 21:9), Pricilla who with her husband instructed Apollos (Acts 18:25), and Phoebe who served the church as a servant/deacon (Romans 16:1). We could go on. What is evident is that women have served and continue to serve with absolute necessity in the work of the purposes of God as they are made known in, among and through His people.

What seems to be equally clear, however, is that there is no woman in the Bible who serves in the role of “elder/pastor.” Our statement of faith, The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 upholds this clear, biblical standard. The Southern Baptist Convention has addressed this issue through several resolutions that have no binding effect on the churches of the SBC. They simply reflect the perspective of the messengers gathered in the room at that time. The issue biblically is clear, but historically it comes back again and again to the autonomy of the local church.

Cultural Context

The practice of ordination among Baptists has been as varied as are the cultural contexts

that compose the body of believers known as Southern Baptists. What is clear on this issue is that we have no “one size fits all” for all of our churches. Our commitment to local church autonomy has led us to different expressions in local congregations in relationship to the issue of ordination. Since we have no hierarchical ecclesiastical body that determines the practices of each local church and since we have a Convention that consists of a very wide range of ethnic groups, it is very understandable from a cultural perspective that we have churches that take different approaches to questions regarding leadership in the local church. What we commit to together as a body of believers who are Baptists is our love for and longing to be loyal to the Bible as the absolute truth of God. We also desire to be faithful to our commonly held beliefs as found in the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. We must not dismiss what we have in common as a community of believers while at the same time not diminishing the cultural contexts that shapes our various local churches. Let’s look for a moment at the African American context.

African American Baptist churches are as diverse on approaches to leadership models in the life of the church as any other Baptist bodies. One of the unique realities in African American Baptist churches in America in the growth and development of these churches was the unfortunate absence of male leadership. African Americans for the large part did not enjoy the privilege of being raised in homes that were directed if not dominated by men. The presence and practice endemic to the institution of slavery limited the role of men in the home. What was found in the home was also found in the church. This reality for African Americans in America created a context in which much of the leadership of the African American church fell to women. This situation in a sense caused the African American woman to assume some leadership roles in the Church. Women began not only to develop and to be developed as leaders but also to see themselves as leaders. It is not possible to see this emergence and development of women as leaders in the African American church as an entirely good or bad development. It simply was what happened in the absence of the availability of men due to the cultural and historical context of slavery. What it would lead to over time, however, could be seen as a move away from what the Bible teaches as the role of woman in relationship

to the man as a “help-meet.” It would lead in time in our larger Baptist family to women not only being involved in major leadership roles in Baptist life but also being ordained and serving in certain leadership staff positions. This reality exists in the churches of the National Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

What we have established to this point in our research is that the Bible is clear: we are all equal before God as sinners who need salvation through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are all equal before God when saved as those who seek to serve God together in and through His church (Galatians 3:26-28). What is equally clear, however, is that God has established in His Word both for His glory and our good different roles for men and women in the home and in the church. Men as designed by God and designated for His glory and our flourishing are to lead in the home as husbands and fathers (Eph. 5:21-6:4) and in the Church as pastors who teach the Word of God and care for the souls of people (1 Peter 5:1-4, Titus 1:5ff, 1 Timothy 3, and Ephesians 4:11ff.). The pastoral office is reserved for men. What we have seen theologically is that ordination is for those who serve in the pastoral office. We diminish the pastoral office and the functions of that office when we expand ordination beyond the reach of the pastoral office and the functions that it serves. We have finally seen historically and culturally that Baptists in order to maintain the diversity of our denomination and the integrity of our witness have had time and again to return to our focus on the autonomy of the local church. We turn now to some suggested practical implications all of which are rooted in our now greater understanding and appreciation of the autonomy of the local church.

Practical Implications

We want to identify seven areas that have surfaced for us during our research for this project. We believe that they represent areas in which each pastor and local church must address. We will identify the areas and make just a few statements about each one. We could, of course, address each one far more extensively but we will leave that to you.

1. Scriptural Sufficiency. Here is where we began. It is where we end. It is the most important

issue of all. Are we really Bible people? Do we really believe that the Bible is sufficient to answer every question it is intended to answer and if so, we surely must believe that it is sufficient for the question of the subjects of ordination?

2. Priesthood of the Believer. We must be clear about what this precious doctrine means. It means historically at least that each and every child of God is responsible before God for the integrity and validity of our salvation and that we are responsible to each other's as priests to each other. We do not need a priest or a preacher to gain access to God. What it does not mean is that the Bible is subject to our own interpretation so that we are the final and ultimate authority to determine what Scripture says (2 Peter 1:19-20).
3. Subjects of Ordination. Those who are the subjects of ordination should only be those who meet the basic biblical requirements for ordination. That a person seeks ordination should not in any way be the first or final word on whom we ordain. One study found that many larger churches do a better job of screening subjects for ordination than smaller churches because smaller churches are often more directed by knowing the person, his or her parents and grandparents etc. than what the Bible teaches about who must be the subjects for ordination.
4. Calling out the Called. This is related to number 3 but is more basic. The Reformation would give birth to the principle of the "internal call" and the "external call." The first is simply someone who believes that God is calling them to ministry. He shares that with his pastor. And his pastor with some other leaders in the church begin to work with this young man either to confirm or not confirm this call, to develop over time the legitimacy or not of that man's call to Gospel ministry.
5. Process or Procedure. This is also related to 3 and 4 but more specific and precise. One of our SBC leaders says that we have become at times lazy in our process. We are leaving out necessary steps and even our own anecdotal evidence would indicate some laxity when we schedule, for example, an ordination council and an ordination service on the same day.

We need to give some attention to the very clear distinctions between licensure in Baptist life and ordination. For example, a man who is licensed is under the care and concern of the pastor and leaders of the local church where he is a member. Ordination is different. It is a request made by another church of the local church where the prospective pastor is a member. The church making the request has seen gifts in abilities in this man that cause them to want to “employ” him in pastoral ministry. Quite frankly, we simply need to slow down and give much more serious attention to the steps from “I am sensing God calling me to ministry,” to “I am now the official pastor or youth pastor of Beulahland Baptist Church in Badlands, Texas (I hope that church does not exist).

6. Pastoral Responsibility. This one stings. We as pastors who lead our churches must do more to teach our churches about ordination and to be on the lookout for young men who may be among the called out and don't know it yet. We must lead more effectively and more biblically in the process from called out to commissioning. We believe it is also essential for pastors to “push” those who are sensing God's call toward good sound and biblically faithful theological training.
7. Local Church Autonomy. We have been clear throughout our time together on this project to know that the autonomy of every local church and every Baptist entity beyond the local church is precious to us. And that is why this last section is entitled “implications, “ and not even suggestions. Each local church has to take responsibility to chart her course in this matter.

servicing as pastors as a se 8. Albert Mohler wrote an article back in 2005 on theological triage. The concept comes from the medical community. The context, for example, is someone coming to an emergency room from the scene of an accident where the person being brought in has all kinds of problems. The medical staff has the responsibility to decide what is of first importance and what is of secondary importance. What are the life and death issues and what are the other issues, that though critical, do not depend for survival on immediate attention? Mohler suggested that we

think in terms of first order, second order, and third order issues. A first order issue would be non-negotiable. We would not for any reason compromise on this issue. Issues that are first order issues would be biblical inerrancy, the doctrine of the Trinity, the full deity and humanity of Jesus and the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to be saved. Second order issues would be issues that are critical but not enough to cause a church to break fellowship with another church. Second order issues would be things like how often we observe the Lord's Supper or the version of the Bible we read and use. Mohler includes women serving as pastors as a second order issue. Third order issues would be issues with which we can have real and genuine disagreements but still enjoy genuine, God-honoring fellowship with one another. Third order issues would be things like our view of the millennium or what kinds of music we sing in our worship.

What each local church faces is where to place the issue of ordination in this order, and particularly as it applies to the ordination of women as pastors or into other leadership positions in the church. The truth may well be that churches would disagree over whether it really is a second order issue or whether it rises to the level of being a first order issue.

Conclusion

Given the Biblical, theological, historical, and cultural contexts of ordination, what does all this mean to Georgia Baptists? The Georgia Baptist Mission Board is made up of approximately 3,600 churches. What do we believe about ordination? What is our stance on ordination? The working definition of ordination as stated in this paper is "the public recognition by a local church for Gospel ministry of persons who have demonstrated in ways that have satisfied the membership of the local church that this person has been called to Gospel ministry and is ready to pursue Gospel ministry in a local church." Thus, who will Georgia Baptists publicly recognize as candidates for ordination? The theological answer presented in this paper is clear that ordination is only for those who serve in a pastoral capacity. (The scope of our focus here is pastor ordination only, not deacon ordination) Likewise, it is clear that the New Testament assigns the office of pastor to men only. The primary function of the office of pastor is to preach and teach the Word of God in the gathered assembly

of the local church. The Georgia Baptist Convention believes the office and this function is for men only. Thus, the Georgia Baptist Convention will only recognize ordination for men serving as pastors. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. (I Timothy 2:12)