

REIMAGINING MINISTRY AND ORDINATION FOR THE POST-
CHRISTENDOM MAINLINE PROTESTANT CHURCH

Kevin Ward

University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

In Western societies like New Zealand and Australia the church is in various degrees of crisis¹ because of the decline in church involvement and Christian belief. Of this, none have been more thoroughly impacted than what we might call mainline Protestant churches—those which came out of the European Reformation and may be described as reformed either narrowly such as Presbyterian or Reformed, or more broadly such as Anglican, Methodist, or Congregational—although the latter scarcely exist anymore in our two countries. After looking at possible causes of this significantly changed situation for the church, this article suggests that part of the reason for these churches being impacted more than most others is that the theology and practice of ministry that developed out of the Reformation and has been largely retained is no longer well fitted for our context. It then explores some ways in which, still drawing on the biblical foundations and theological traditions we hold to, this might be developed and expanded to be more effective for this context.

Various explanations have been given as to the causes of this decline, of which the most common have been secularization, the social and cultural changes sometimes lumped under the label of postmodernity (whatever that is), and the collapse of

1. In stating this I would also want to acknowledge Hendrick Kraemer's point that "the church is always in a state of crisis, and that its greatest shortcoming is that it is only occasionally aware of this" (Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 24). He goes on to add that it "has always needed apparent failure and suffering in order to become fully alive to its real nature and mission" (Kraemer, *The Christian Message*, 26).

Christendom. It seems to me that the most significant of these is our post-Christendom context, which is, of course, due to the fact that we now live in fully secular societies—regardless of the degree to which secularization theory, at least in its classic form, may have been responsible for that.

British historian Ian Randall has helpfully summarized the seven significant shifts that have taken place in the life of the church as the last remnants of Christendom disappear.

From the centre to margins
 From majority to minority
 From settlers to sojourners
 From privilege to plurality
 From control to witness
 From maintenance to mission
 From institution to movement²

As the church shrunk under the impact of these changes there was a realisation in many quarters that we could no longer continue business as usual and so we witnessed a parade of movements and church models that sought to save the church. This probably began with the charismatic movement, then the church growth movement, cell churches, house church movement, healthy churches, megachurches, and seeker churches. We might well ask if the missional church movement is the latest to have morphed into one of these. However, they were all still based on the same basic paradigm of church which had developed in Christendom and gradually evolved and changed slowly over fifteen centuries.³ The most significant of these for the churches focused on here was the Reformation of the sixteenth century. These changes were all to some degree more about style than substance, or perhaps we might more correctly say form than essence. They were based on the assumption that everyone in the community was already Christian and that the church served the purpose of making them better Christians, or in the later decades to get them to come to church, or at least to our church, and that

2. Randall, "Mission in Post-Christendom," 238.

3. See Mead, *Once and Future Church*, 9–28, for a good description of the basic parameters of this.

at the centre of its life was a special individual or “Holy Man,” although having a teaching/preaching function rather than a priestly one.

A Missiological Perspective on Our Context

For missiologists, recognition that we are no longer in Christendom has significantly changed our understanding of mission. In the Christendom era, mission happened as people went from Christendom (where everybody was Christian) to other places where people were not Christian (for us in New Zealand, overseas). Today the understanding, which has only developed at all widely since the end of the Second World War, is that the church everywhere is now in a missionary context and mission is from everywhere to everywhere. Significant in this realisation was the work of Lesslie Newbigin, who, after nearly 40 years in India, returned to Britain and realised all the changes since he left meant it was now as much a non-Christian country as the India he had returned from. So, in 1987 he raised the question “Can the West be converted?”⁴

It is out of Newbigin’s work that the missional church movement arose, and while there are questions one would want to ask about some of the material associated with it, nevertheless I think it is the most helpful of all the movements and trends in helping us think about church and ministry in our “questioning” age after Christendom.

The term missional church is applied almost everywhere today, but I often feel it is generally misunderstood. Alan Roxburgh, part of the original group who launched the movement, points to its recent genesis and wide misuse saying it may have the distinction of going from “obscurity to banality in eight short years”⁵ and so often it is just about developing some programs that can be added on to the church as it is in order to keep it going.

4. Newbigin, “Can the West,” 1–7.
5. Roxburgh, “The Missional Church,” 2.

Fundamentally it is not about programs, or activities, or projects. It is about a theological conviction that comes from a truly Trinitarian understanding of God, beginning as theology should with God's self-revelation in Christ. That God is a missional God, a sending God. The Father sends the Son into the world and the Father and the Son send the Spirit. For what? To participate in God's mission in the world, that of reconciling all things together, making all things whole. Then God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) sends the church into the world to participate with God in that mission. So, the mission of God (*missio dei*) precedes the mission of the church (*missio ecclesiarum*).

As Newbigin brought to our attention, the more important text for our understanding of who we are and what we are to do as God's new community is not the end of Matt 28, but rather John 20:19–22:

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (NRSV)

As Jürgen Moltmann expresses it: "What we have to learn . . . is not that the church 'has' a mission, but the very reverse: that the mission of Christ creates its own church. Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the church has to be understood."⁶ Christopher Wright in similar vein writes: "It is not so much a case that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church but the church for mission."⁷

This is why Newbigin began possibly his most significant work, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, with the doctrine of election, which is widely misunderstood. It is not about who is

6. Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 10.

7. Wright, *Mission of God*, 62.

going to heaven and who is not but rather about what we are called (elected) to do. Election in scripture is never for our sake but for the sake of others and as Abraham was called so that “all nations might be blessed through him,” and Israel elected to be “a light to the nations,” so our missionary God calls into being a new community (an *ecclesia*—“called out assembly”) as God’s missionary people in the world “to be a sign, instrument and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society.”⁸

So, as we try and imagine what shape church might take in this time and what forms of ministry might enable it to carry out its calling, my fundamental conviction is that this understanding needs to be the foundation out of which everything else flows. As Emil Brunner expressed it nearly a century ago: “The church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Where there is no mission there is no church; and where there is neither church nor mission, there is no faith.”⁹ This means in our even more challenging context, as Martin Robinson puts it:

The challenge for the church now is to stop thinking merely about methods to reverse the decline but to reconsider the basic purpose and call of the church. To return to mission as the core *raison d’être* of the church will inevitably mean that the shape of the church will change. Our very failure may well assist us to return to that innovation stage of the life of the church when the church ceases to do church but to do mission. What flows from mission will still be the church, but it will be a very different kind of church.¹⁰

Leadership and Tradition

As well as the assumption that people were already Christian, the other basic assumption that underlay all the various forms of church which developed in Christendom was that at the centre (and in control) of its life was the priest, or in later variations the “Holy Man” in a variety of different forms, because the central

8. Newbigin, *Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 233.

9. Brunner, *Word and the World*, 108.

10. Robinson, *Invading Secular Space*, 32.

focus of church life was what happened on Sunday and “he” was the conductor.

One can argue structures of leadership were an essential part of the early-Christian movement. Apostolic missionaries who planted Christian communities to continue the mission of God in particular places identified those they discerned to be the Spirit’s gifts to them for various ministries of leadership. Mark Bonnington writes:

Apostolic leadership existed from the very beginning. It gave the churches basic cohesion. There were tensions between leaders, but foreign to the NT is the kind of model advocated in some circles . . . This sees an inverse relationship between ecclesiastical authority and spiritual power and advocates a return to primitive egalitarianism in the Spirit as the key to the renewal of the church. The testimony of the NT is different: it grows with recognised leadership from the beginning, but that leadership is not unfamiliar with the life and power of the Spirit. The question is not whether to have leadership or not but what kind of leadership to have for the growth of the church.¹¹

This leadership is described in a variety of ways such as apostles, overseers, elders, deacons, ministers. While structured leadership is a given the scattered texts indicate the structure was diverse. The NT does not reflect “a single pattern of ministry which might serve as a blueprint or continuing norm for all future ministry in the Church.”¹² While there are references to leadership, structures are not a central emphasis. Darrell Guder writes: “They appear rather to have been part of the contextualising of the various communities in their particular locations. The necessary functions of leadership are in some way carried out so that the witnessing communities can function in their particular settings, but the shapes and forms of that leadership vary.”¹³

As leadership developed in the early church, the NT images of steward and shepherd evolved into a focus on bishop, presbyter or elder “inheriting and transmitting faithfully the apostolic message and ensuring the safety of God’s flock” against dangers

11. Bonnington, “The Kingdom of God,” 72.

12. World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 24.

13. Guder, “Walking Worthily,” 2.

from within and without.¹⁴ This was further developed by the classic patristic writings, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and Gregory the Great in integrating the role into Christ's threefold office of prophet, priest, and king (or leader) which shaped it for the next 1500 years, including for the Reformers. Michael Jinkins notes that "the high-water marks of seventeenth century pastoralia, George Herbert's *Country Parson* and Richard Baxter's *The Reformed Pastor*, are in many ways merely extensions of the work of the patristic authors."¹⁵

I want to look mainly out of my own context, the Reformed tradition and in particular the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand (PCANZ), but I am aware it is as much in issue in many other churches, particularly those of the mainline Protestant tradition, all of whom have their rather rigidly defined forms of ordained and recognised ministry. For us, it has become an increasingly dominant theme of discussion and conversations particularly among our younger leaders; that our current understanding and model of ministry is creaking at the joints and not serving us very well. We are trying to squeeze the increasingly wide variety of ministries we need into a very narrow box, and for many the fit is increasingly uncomfortable. The only real place we have is as "Minister of Word and Sacrament" in a parish setting.

For the Reformers their concern was not for the mission of the church, but the reform of the church. Karl Barth criticizes the Reformers' view of the church as self-sufficient for lacking in missionary orientation.¹⁶ Key concerns were the place of Scripture above tradition and the conduct of the Lord's Supper; that it be non-sacerdotal or priestly. So, the church existed wherever the "word of God is purely preached" and "the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution." So, Ministers of Word and Sacrament. Also, it was in a Christendom context, so it was a pastoral/chaplaincy model and discipline/pastoral care was added as a third mark. These were the requirements for a

14. Jinkins, "Religious Leadership," 311.

15. Jinkins, "Religious Leadership," 312.

16. Barth, *CD* 3/2:762–95.

minister; “the triple ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care” which Paul Avis finds embedded in Christ’s great commission to the disciples in Matt 28.¹⁷ This served the church reasonably well in Christendom where the concern was not with mission but to ensure those who were Christian (the baptised so it included almost everyone) were truly Christian so it would be a Christian society. But it is not where we now live and is part of the wider challenge of Reformed theology, which many are now arguing was a northern European contextualization of the gospel in the context of Christendom.¹⁸

A Reformed Perspective

The Reformed tradition recognised four offices: teaching elder, ruling elder, pastor, deacon. Teaching elder and pastor were on the whole conflated into the role of minister. Following Calvin, they tend to gravitate to Eph 4:1–16 for their understanding of the ordered ministry, what Marcus Barth calls “The Constitution of the Church.”¹⁹ They also have tended to follow Calvin in the treatment of the key verses, vv. 11–12. After centuries of Christendom he had problems with Christ’s gifts of apostles, prophets, and evangelists: “These three functions were not established in the churches as permanent ones, but only for that time during which churches were to be erected where none existed before.” Now in Christendom that was no longer the case. He did acknowledge there might be special situations where they become necessary again, but they were “exceptional” not normative, unlike “pastors and teachers, whom the church can never go without.”²⁰

However, it seems clear that is now an inadequate understanding for the post-Christendom context we are in today. If the church is to continue playing a vital role in societies like New

17. Avis, *Ministry Shaped by Mission*, 21–22.

18. See e.g., Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom*; Tennant, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*; Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule them All.”

19. Barth, *Ephesians*, 425–96.

20. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV:3.4, 1057.

Zealand, where the church is no longer central, then its ministry cannot be focussed solely, or even primarily, inside the church. If our context means we are a missionary church once again then we fundamentally need to be training missiologically informed and formed ministers for whatever their context. In a world where the church is now marginal, or in some cases absent, we need to find ways of equipping and ordaining those who have apostolic, prophetic and evangelistic ministries (and may be others also), to enable the ministry of Christ to reach into places and communities where the church is not. We still need those who are gifted as pastors and teachers to serve as ministers (of word, sacrament, and pastoral care) within the church to form and transform a missionary church, but these other ministries need to be trained and ordained to serve alongside equally as ministers of the gospel, as the church endeavours to reach into new fields of those who are not yet part of Christ's church.

Our ecclesiology does not allow for those who have apostolic, prophetic, or evangelistic gifts, except by putting them in as "ministers of word and sacrament" (and pastoral care) in a parish context where they get frustrated and the church gets frustrated. They are "square pegs in a round hole," as one put it to me recently. Or, they do not go in for the long process necessary for ordination which they see as just frustrating their energy and innovation and are put into a position where they can exercise those gifts but are not "real ministers" and cannot administer the sacraments and sometimes not even preach. Darrel Guder writes:

For all the talk about the priesthood of all believers, there are many traces of Christendom's legacy in the ways that the ordered ministry actually functions. The clergy laity distinction persists. Congregations still tend to think that their ministers are there to provide the services that meet their religious needs . . . one might say that the pedagogue model of the Reformation did not replace the priest but merged with it. That merger continues on in the modern metaphor of the minister as professional, with priestly attitudes and expectations.²¹

21. Guder, "Walking Worthily," 5.

I have contended for some years that in the PCANZ we have a “functional sacerdotalism,” which in many ways is more controlling than, say, the Anglicans whose ministers are priests. Indeed, there are some who argue that word and sacrament are constitutive of the church. Guder writes: “Try as we will, especially in the Reformed legacy, to correct the impression that there is something sacerdotal, some necessary mediatorial givenness, in the ordained minister, our members still want to put us priestly pedestals.”²² One could add that there are also many who want to be there. So, Alan Roxborough argues the church will not be truly reformed until it is clericalized, a contention that I would also support.

Over the past few years I have heard a repeated cry from those who are finding our current model is not serving us well in many of our rural communities, in planting new churches, in many of our ethnic contexts, with young adults and in community ministries. It is important that we do not just respond pragmatically to make this possible, but do what the Reformers did centuries ago and re-examine the scriptures and the tradition of the church in which we stand in the light of the new context we find ourselves in and allow the Spirit to open our eyes to new ways that God might be able to work.

I was recently involved in a Presbyterian/Anglican dialogue in New Zealand and came across a report from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches on The Anglican-Reformed International Commission (1981–84) called “God’s reign and our unity.” It argued: “(1) . . . All attempts to read off one divinely authorized form of ministry from the NT are futile. (2) The church is a living body which should combine continuity of tradition, with adaptation to new situations under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (3) Not all developments of the past nineteen centuries are to be regarded as divinely sanctioned.”²³ Encouragingly it later adds that we should “consider afresh, in the light of contemporary circumstances, the various ministries described . . .

22. Guder, “Walking Worthily,” 7.

23. Anglican-Reformed International Commission, *God’s Reign and Our Unity*, 77.

under the names of prophets and evangelists.”²⁴ In other words, to live out our belief that the “church is reformed and is always being reformed under the Word of God.”

In similar vein, Karl Barth, regarded by many within our tradition as the touchstone for orthodoxy, writes on the church that “in every age and place its constitution and order have been broadly determined and conditioned by political, economic, and cultural models more or less imperatively forced on it by its situation in world history . . . It has had and still has to adapt or approximate itself to these in order to maintain itself . . . in respect of the form of its existence . . . there is no sacred sociology [of the church].”²⁵ A piece that seems to have passed many by.

My perspective on the place of tradition in the life of the church is well expressed by Doug Gay: “Not everything the Church needs for its existence in the world is already there within the tradition. The nature of the Church’s journey through space and time involves it in a continuing negotiation between the faith once delivered to the saints and the incarnation of that faith in each new context.”²⁶ From this position I believe we need to revisit three particular things in our tradition by bringing them into conversation with scripture, our current practice and our post-Christendom context. I only have time to touch on these briefly and give an outline of the issues to explore and develop further on what they might look like.

Ordination and Ministry

First, the limiting of ordination to those whose ministry is in effect that of pastor-teachers or parish ministers. We have already indicated that Eph 4:11–12 was central in its development for Calvin and is still a key text in our understanding of ministry.

24. Anglican-Reformed International Commission, *God’s Reign and Our Unity*, 99.

25. Barth, *CD* 3/2:739.

26. Gay, *Remixing the Church*, 72. He goes on to add: “The principle *semper reformanda* is therefore both an entirely right and entirely necessary expression of the Church’s epistemic and hermeneutical humility.”

Today there would hardly be a leading NT commentator who would still agree with Calvin's treatment of these verses regarding the first three as having ceased. Also, if Calvin was right in claiming they were non-existent because they were not needed in Christendom, it raises an interesting question: since we are now in post-Christendom, may this not be a time in which God has restored them? They are certainly desperately needed as they were in the first few centuries. In his treatment of these verses Marcus Barth points out that they are all ministers of the Word. They share the common task of speech in the service of God's message. In diverse ways they serve the proclamation of the Word, be it apostolically, prophetically, evangelistically, or pastorally and pedagogically. It seems it takes a range of gifted people to provide the Word formation that truly equips the saints for their shared calling, which is the work of ministry that builds up Christ's body so that I would add we can live out our calling of engaging in God's mission in the world. Barth expresses it in this way: "the task of the special ministers . . . is to be servants in that ministry which is entrusted to the whole church. Their place is not above but below the great number of saints who are not adorned by resounding titles. Everyone of the special ministers is a *servus servorum Dei*."²⁷

While I am not a fan of the way in which the fivefold (APEPT) ministry is worked out by many who favour it²⁸ (another system to make the church grow!) and believe many of the frameworks developed for it are seriously flawed in their interpretation of what each gift is and how it relates to the life of the church, I think the essential reality is that we do need all of these ministries to be exercised in the life of the church, both locally and trans-locally, if the church is going to effectively engage in God's mission today. The ecclesial question I have for us in the Reformed tradition, who believe that word and sacrament belong together, is if people with these gifts then are ordained into positions where they can exercise their ministry of the word other

27. Barth, *Ephesians*, 481.

28. See e.g., Hirsch and Catchin, *The Permanent Revolution*. They use Shepherd instead of Pastor in their framework.

than leading what happens when we worship together in church, why can they not also be authorized to exercise a ministry of sacraments?

Eldership and Ministry

Second, a renewal of the function of elders in the life of our churches which many would argue is, as the name suggests, the core distinctive of Presbyterianism. Initially the Presbyterian Church only had one ordination, of two kinds of elders; teaching and ruling. Over time though that morphed into two kinds of ordination, to word and sacrament and eldership, with the former seen as being somehow different (more holy?) although the words are very similar.²⁹ Pastoral Care has historically been seen as one of the three core tasks of ministry and in the Reformed tradition discipline was added as a third mark of the church alongside word and sacrament (Augsburg Confession and Church of Scotland, though not by Calvin). Sometimes this has been seen very negatively (especially following John Knox and Church of Scotland practice) but more positively it is really about discipleship or formation of the lives of people both individually and communally. In the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions this has always been at the core of the role of elders, providing spiritual oversight along with the minister and pastoral care, traditionally exercised through elder's districts. Our Book of Order recognises this in seeing two of the four functions as being "(c) pastoral care" and oversight of the congregation and "(d) spiritual nurture." Again, in the Reformed tradition all of these functions should be word centred, and great emphasis was placed in teaching people both in public and privately in their

29. Joseph Small (*Ordination and Authority*, 6–7) argues that "the change in terminology from 'teaching and ruling elders' to 'Minister of Word and Sacrament' and elders' has diminished consciousness of the integral inter-relatedness of these ordered ministries and has marginalized the pastoral calling to be a teacher of the faith. Instead this mutual calling is intended to ensure clear proclamation of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, and to nurture congregational fidelity to God's new way in the world."

homes (Richard Baxter for instance). So, in effect these also are ministries of the word, privately if not publicly, although again our Book of Order does allow for them to preach the word “according to his or her gifts” (although notably under the authority of the minister). Sadly, in all the changes that have impacted on the life of churches the role of elders has evolved from this “spiritual” role to that of being in effect managers of an organisation.³⁰ This has only led to an increase in the minister or clergy centeredness of most of our churches; he or she is the holy man or woman who performs the spiritual functions for us to consume and be nurtured by.

There is widespread agreement among many that if our churches are to move out of this and again become the vital communities where all are engaged in its life and mission then for us a renewal of our tradition in this regard needs to be central. As a newcomer (seventeen years) into a Reformed or Presbyterian Church (I was always basically reformed theologically while a Baptist, an increasing oddity in New Zealand) and ended up teaching the Presbyterian and Reformed Christianity course to those training as ministers for the church. I asked the person who developed the course and has published widely on it both in New Zealand and globally, what are the core things in it. One of the two he mentioned was “the role of the laity in leadership.” Increasingly much of the literature on contemporary missional church talks about the need for team leadership, and one of the things I really value about Presbyterian polity is this is what, in theory at least, it is; not a one-man band.³¹ We have the framework and pay lip service to it, but we need to let go of the desire to control as well as renew and restore to be fully functioning,

30. In part this has come about a change in many of our churches as a result of falling numbers and smaller sizes from having a Session and Board of Managers, to a Parish Council in which both are present. As always business (management) dominates as it is easier to deal with.

31. When I was appointed to my position at Knox College, one of the courses I was to teach was a new course for its ordinands, “Congregational Leadership.” I discovered as someone new into the church from the Baptist Church there had been quite a lengthy period of debate as to whether a Presbyterian College could/should teach leadership to those training for ministry.

the elders who are indeed equal partners with us in leading and shaping God's missional church.

One final point on this; if they are also ministers of the word as well as pastoral care why should they not also be ministers of sacrament? Our Book of Order has at least made a move in this direction in initially allowing elders to "preside at the celebration of communion" and more recently to "baptise" as well. I am not arguing that all elders should necessarily be authorized to do this as some are not necessarily gifted to communicate the word in the way appropriate (and I witnessed many examples while I was in the Baptist church, where almost anyone could do it, and neither have proclaimed the gospel), but while it has been possible there has been a reluctance by ordained ministers to allow this too widely, as they have wanted to protect their patch. In my observation it is limiting the mission of the church as when a new mission initiative begins to form a community which may gather around the word and worship, if the bread and wine are to be shared together then a proper minister needs to be imported into the community, creating an artificial sense when what has developed has often been highly relational.

In working on this article, I have been reminded again of the prophetic writings of Roland Allen, a missionary in China in the early decades of last century, in *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours* and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*.³² These came out of his reflections on the failings of the missionary enterprise in China and when I came across them early in my ministry they immediately seemed a word to me in our now missionary context in the West. His two main themes were the church and the Holy Spirit. He argued that churches should be indigenous from the beginning, but missionaries placed barriers in the way which prevented this happening. These included rigid catechumenate requirements, Western standards of ministry and non-indigenous patterns of authority and discipline. In regard to his second theme he argued that "mission activities" had been substituted for the "Spirit in activity" as mission work. There was an unwillingness to trust the work of the Spirit in non-ordained

32. Allen, *Missionary Methods and Spontaneous Expansion*.

indigenous leaders. In *Spontaneous Expansion* he listed four essentials the missionary should put in the hands of the young church and then leave trusting them to the Holy Spirit. These were a creed, the gospel, the sacraments and the ministry. The third of these pertain to the point being made here.

If there is anywhere an isolated group of Christians today, they can have no church life, they cannot live as members of a Church in which the rites of Christ are observed, unless they get one of the ordained class to come to them; for no bishop ordains one or two of them to act for their fellows as the bishops of the early church did . . . the scattered laity are impotent.³³

Deacons and Ministry

Third, the lost office of deacon is a concern. For most of the church's history deacons have been one of the recognized forms of ministry. In the Baptist churches in which I spent most of my life it was again a two-fold ministry, minister and deacons (as opposed to ministers and elders) and at age twenty-one that was the first leadership office I had in the church. In the Presbyterian church though, deacons have largely disappeared from the life of the church and no longer exist in our Book of Order. In the traditional understanding deacons were those who performed humble tasks of service. They were secretaries, treasurers, property managers, greeters at the door, helped the elderly, among many other tasks. In the PCANZ in this vein there were women deaconesses, and this allowed them to be employed to do those kinds of tasks, which was all that women were allowed to do. Anglicans have at least retained the office of deacon, although it is seen largely as a step on the road to becoming priests, so once again hierarchical. This interpretation of deacon is based of course on the use of the term in Acts 6, where the seven (as distinct from the twelve) were appointed "to serve at tables" and so serve the needs, particularly food, of the poor and needy.

33. Paton, *The Ministry of the Spirit*, 157.

In recent decades, however, a radically different understanding has developed, led by the work of John N. Collins.³⁴ The heart of the argument is that *diakonia* does not mean humble service of the needy. Its connotations are rather of commissioned, responsible agency and authoritative embassy. The service is primarily of the one who sends and commissions, in the New Testament of God. Only secondarily is it of those to whom one is sent. For Paul the *diakonia* with which he had been entrusted was a stewardship of God's revelation in Christ of the mystery that had been made known (1 Cor 3:5). He and his fellow workers were ministers (*diakonia*) of a new covenant which was the authoritative message that they carried as they engaged in this *diakonia* of reconciliation (1 Cor 3:6, 5:18), the ministry of the word of the God (2 Cor 4:1–5). This sense of *diakonos* makes it a close cousin of *apostolos*, and Paul uses both terms of himself almost interchangeably. What links both together is the idea of mission, of being sent forth to fulfil a task on behalf of the one who has the authority to send.

For Luke also *diakonia* was a sacred mandate that had to be carried out. Acts 6, as we have said, has influenced the understanding of deacon in the Reformed tradition, but the Seven are never called deacons as such, and Philip and Stephen are clearly gifted evangelists (again ministers of the Word). At the beginning of Acts (1:8) the apostolic mission to witness to the risen Lord and carry the gospel to the ends of the earth is termed *diakonia* and the term is paralleled with the calling of the Apostles in 1:25: “this ministry and apostleship.” So, the use of *diakon* words in Paul and Luke is dynamic and functional but, by the time we reach the Pastorals, its function has evolved into office and deacons are a distinct kind of minister and from this it evolved in various ways in the church of Christendom.

If this understanding of the term is revived and renewed in the light of the New Testament witness (being always reformed under the Word of God) then it seems to me it opens up a way in which being faithful to both scripture and our Reformed tradition

34. Collins, *Deacons and the Church*. Avis, *Ministry Shaped by Mission*, introduced me to the work of Collins and has helped shape what follows.

we can begin to ordain people into a variety of ministry positions in the church, which are needed in our post-Christendom missional context. Some of these will indeed be ministries of the word, and where appropriate I would again argue that the ordination should also include the authority to administer (rightly) the sacraments. I have always maintained that all Christian ministry should be done pastorally, so again the triple ministry should be found.

Dwight Zscheille also calls for a rethinking of the ministry of Deacons.

Deacons in the early church were emissaries entrusted with a sacred commission across boundaries. They held executive authority and were responsible for the proclamation of the gospel, working with bishops as administrators of ministry in large areas. We need diaconal leadership in today's new apostolic era, particularly in fostering partnerships between local ministry teams, congregations, community leaders, and civil society organizations.³⁵

He goes on later to add that: "Rather than primarily being construed as a ministry of care-giving service the diaconate can be understood in a more apostolic vein. Deacons can offer crucial leadership in interfacing with new populations and generations. . . . Deacons can be pivotal bridge builders . . . in relations to those not yet part of the church."³⁶

If this office was renewed and revitalised in the ways suggested here it would enable those so gifted and called to be publicly recognised and ordained into the special ministries the church might need in order to connect with people in some of the many different contexts and communities that exist in our culturally diverse society. These could include ministry:

with young people or young adults
with families and children.
with those in the now recognised phase of third age as well as the already established ministry for those in old age.
in schools, colleges, and universities

35. Zscheille, *People of the Way*, 126.

36. Zscheille, *People of the Way*, 127.

among ethnic and cultural minorities
in migrant communities
in marginalised communities such as social housing estates, the
homeless, or those with special needs
with those involved in workplace support and pioneer ministries
with those engaged in community or social ministries

These are all the kind of specialised ministries the church certainly needs if it is to fully engage missionally in our diverse and pluralized post-Christendom context, often ministries people are doing but without the recognition and the authority to do all they would love to and often feel called to.³⁷

Conclusion

In almost all of our churches, particularly mainline Protestant churches, the pastor-teacher is dominant, and if we are going to be effective in the mission God has called us into, we need to make room not only for the other strategic leadership gifts of apostle, prophet, and evangelist, but believing practically in the priesthood of all believers to empower and make space for all of the priests so that all of the gifts God has given are evident in the life and mission of the church. Ross Hastings writes in *Missional God, Missional Church*, we pay lip service to this, “but in most churches minister/priest/pastor control stemming from insecurity so often prevents it.” His hope is for the church to be missional by “being a community fraught with the Spirit’s breath, a community always invoking the Spirit in its act of worship and epiclesis, a community of the Word taught in the power of the Spirit, a community led and empowered by the Spirit with the fullness of charismatic gifts in a manner that releases the church from human control and Western cultural formality.”³⁸ In most churches in our tradition the latter exercised through those who

37. Those many engaged in ministry with youth or children’s and families are generally called just the “Youth Worker” or “Children’s and Family Worker,” giving them little status, or authority expectation they were providing ministry.

38. Hastings, *Missional God*, 294.

have been ordained and are therefore ministers, in the light of our current imagination and theology, act as a bottleneck so this does not happen.³⁹ It is time to lift off the cap and release into ministry all the gifts that God through the Spirit has given to God's church to continue the ministry and mission of Christ in the world.

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39. One of the very best students I have had in my thirty years of theological teaching, who has come into and embraced the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition from a Pentecostal then Baptist background, made this very perceptive comment in an essay on ordination and leadership, focusing on the priesthood of all believers. "I note the Presbyterian predilection for orderliness, which results in a firm grip on the ecclesial reigns, and sense a level of control in the Presbyterian system that has the potential to stifle the gifts of the Spirit in worship and a predisposition to move toward grasping power." (From an essay written by Charissa Nicol, 2018.)

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