

# **The Ontology of the Ordained Person: A Theological Evaluation**

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*ABSTRACT—Ordination is a significant concept in the history of the Christian Church. The urgency for denominations to formulate a theology of ordination shows that the issue has gone beyond scholarship and becomes a matter crucial to faith. In the absence of a biblical systematic theology of ordination, the quest to know what ordination confers to the ordained person remains problematic. It is in this context that should be understood the functional- ontological dilemma posed by the act of ordination. Through a theological survey, however, this study claims that ordination per se bestows nothing supernatural susceptible to change the ontological make-up of the recipient. Said differently, ordination is a human recognition of the calling of an individual through the laying on of hands that grants more prerogatives and thereby enables the beneficiary to function as an authorized representative of the Church.*

*Keywords: Ordination, ordained person, ontology, church, ministry*

## **I. Introduction**

Ordination into the gospel ministry has become an issue that elicits the interest of both ministers and laity. This has been occasioned by the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church does not have an elaborate doctrine of ordination to the ministry (see Burton, 1996, para. 1). Unlike the Roman Catholic Church which has formulated a systematic way and coherent doctrine of ordination in their church (See Fransen, 1975, pp. 1122-48; Hardon, 1975, pp. 523-28;

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McKenzie, 1969, pp.164-70), the SDA Church has nothing of this sort. One may like to know if a debate about ordination is worth entertaining. An answer to such a question would surely be affirmative since both the Old Testament and the New Testament bear witness to such practice which at that time was understood as the Church appointing individuals into a sacred office (Exod 24:1; Lev 8-9; Num 8: 5-26; 11: 16, 24-25; Deut 16: 18; 21:2; Josh 23:2; 24: 1; 1 Sam 10: 1; 1 Kgs 19: 16-21; Acts 6:6; 8:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). If this is true, then, the question bounces back. Why speculate on an issue already settled by the Bible? The truth is that Scriptures fail to present a full-fledged doctrine of ordination. Simply put, there remain several unsaid facts about ordination. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to ascertain what the act of ordination confers on the ordained person. In other words, does it [ordination] bring about an ontological change to the recipient or it is just a human recognition? This will constitute the armature of this investigation. To this end, this study employs a theological approach in order to meet its goal. To circumvent any imbroglio, the study begins by setting the stage for the discussion.

## **II. Setting the Stage**

The subject of ordination has become in the course of the years one of the fulcrums of the Christian faith. Many questions are raised concerning the act of ordination into the ministry. These interrogations usually revolve around the followings: Who qualifies for ordination? Is ordination necessary? What does ordination confer to the recipient? These questions are but a sample of those commonly asked. Before addressing the focal concern of this study, it seems expedient to (1) define ordination, and (2) established the biblical foundation of the practice.

### **A. Defining Ordination**

Biblical languages (i.e., Hebrew and Greek) seem not to provide an equivalent for the English verb 'ordain' and its derivatives. This lack of biblical precision has led to various definitions of the concept of ordination—though sometimes with no significant dichotomy. To begin with, Dawn Trautman states that ordination comes from a Latin word that means "to invest officially (as by the laying on of hands)

with ministerial or priestly authority" (Trautman, 2013, para. 1). It is generally considered to be a religious word, most closely associated with Christians. Wikipedia inscribes that ordination is the process by which individuals are consecrated, that is, set apart as clergy to perform various religious rites and ceremonies (Wikipedia, 2013, para. 2). Don Clements avers that ordination is the solemn setting apart of a person to some public Church office (Clements, 1979, para. 26). "Ordination is also seen as the formal and public recognition of the call of God upon a man to the Gospel ministry by a local church" (Burr, Floyd and Howard, 2006, para. 1). In the same order of ideas, Keith A. Burton asserts that ordination is a public recognition that a person possesses the spiritual gifts necessary for leadership ministry (Burton, 1996, para. 3). Some define ordination as a confirmation by the church that the candidate "demonstrates the gifts and graces that validate his or her call" (Dullon, n.d. p. 16). Stephen V. Sprinkle postulates that ordination means to be inducted into ministerial office as a gifted, graced leader (2004, p. 40).

Leaning on the NT Greek words which are translated "ordain" in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible, Samuel Koranteng-Pipim writes that ordination is the act of the church in choosing, appointing, and setting apart through the laying on of hands certain persons to perform specific functions on behalf of the Church (2001, p. 131). In the same vein, Raoul Dederen defines ordination—from the Seventh-day Adventist perspective—as "the setting apart of the man to a sacred calling, not for one local field, but for the entire church" (Dederen, 1984, p. 151). Without any antagonism to the foregoing, Daniel K. Bediako prefers to lay an emphasis on the cultic nature of ordination when he describes it [ordination] as a formal setting apart and installation of person(s) into a sacred, cultic office. Bediako remarks that not all installations—even in ancient Israel—are ordination since not all of them (e.g., installation of kings and prophets) have cultic responsibilities. (Bediako, unpublished article). One of the latest articles published in the Adventist News Network—on the issue of ordination—states, "Seventh-day Adventists understand ordination, in a biblical sense, as the action of the church in publicly recognizing those whom the Lord has called and equipped for local and global church ministry." (Kellner, 2013, para. 2). The above-mentioned definitions reveal some nuances which are characteristic of the various standpoints in Christian circles. In any case, the basic idea is that of setting apart an individual into a

particular office. Consequently, the use of the word ordination in this paper should be understood as such.

## **B. Biblical Foundation of Ordination**

The importance of ordination in the Christian Church cannot be overemphasized. However, does ordination have a biblical basis? Scholars and theologians seem to be divided on this very question. To begin with, Loren L. Johns posits that any defense of ordination must be made on theological, ecclesiological and/or practical grounds since there is an easy appeal to a biblical precedent (Johns, 2004, p. 115). Similarly, some point out that ordination in both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, as in Protestantism, is believed to have a biblical basis. Others, on the other hand, excoriate the biblical arguments as a misinterpretation of the supposed passages (e.g., Lev 1:4; 4: 15; 8: 22; Num 8:10; 1 Tim 4: 14; 2 Tim 1: 6) supporting ordination (Lloyd, n.d. para. 2). Those who are supportive of the biblical basis of ordination often cite what they call the OT's four primary precedents for ordination (Butler, 1991, s.v. "ordination"). The first occurrence has to do with the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests to God (Exod 28-29 ; Lev 8-9 ); the second relates to the dedication of the Levites as servants of God (Num 8:5-13 ); the third deals with the appointment of the seventy elders to assist Moses (Num 11:16-17; 11:16-17;11:24-25 ); and the fourth relays the commissioning of Joshua as Moses' successor (Num 27:18-23 ).

It appears that one of the problems in determining if ordination is biblical or not stems from the fact that no Hebrew or Greek word translates the technical English word "ordination." Adding to that, it has been established earlier on that there is no clear-cut definition of the word ordination. It follows that one's answer to the question whether ordination is biblical or not would be contingent upon one's definition. Consequently, this study uses the term 'ordination' in reference to any ritual aiming at setting apart an appointee to serve with full authority in a given office of the church. In the next lines, the study seeks to find out whether the act of ordination has an ontological effect on the ordained person.

## **III. Views on the Ontology of the Ordained Person**

If there is quasi-unanimity about the biblical foundation of ordination, there is an obvious polarization of scholarly views on what ordination confers to the ordained person. In fact, two differing opinions emerge among them. While some contend that ordination bestows ontological powers to the recipient of ordination, others, on the other hand, hold that it only grants functional benefits (e.g., authorization to perform sacred tasks that he could not perform otherwise) to the ordained person.

### **A. Ordination as Ontologically-Oriented**

Any minister who enters the Gospel ministry aspires for ordination. In fact, it is often a fascinating dream that materializes on the day of ordination with some ecstatic delight. Sometimes, those who are battling with some particular sins or character defects expect a miracle of deliverance on that day. Then the question comes, does ordination grant its recipient(s) some supernatural endowments? Many are of the view that ordination does so.

To begin with, Louis Berkhof asserts that in the apostolic church (Acts 6: 6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4: 14; 5: 22), the laying on of hands which went hand in hand with ordination implied two things: (1) it meant that a person was set for a certain office, (2) it also implied that some special spiritual gift was conferred upon the ordained person. He proceeds to add that the Church of Rome opines that ordination through the laying on of hands actually confers some spiritual grace upon the recipient, and therefore gives credit to its sacramental significance (Berkhof, 1996, p. 588). Is there any biblical evidence to substantiate Berkhof's claims? Let us have a closer look at these passages (Acts 6: 6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4: 14).

Reading Acts 6:1-6, it is clear that the apostles chose the seven deacons on the basis of the gifts they already possessed. These gifts made them apt for the task concerned. The apostles therefore laid their hands on them to formally endorse their appointment to this sacred office of diaconry. Here, there is no hint that the Seven received a special endowment through the laying on of hands by the apostles. In the same vein, Acts 13:2-3 reveals that Paul and Barnabas were already performing the work for which they were set apart. It follows that the act of setting apart in this context implies a formal and public confirmation of their call for the Gospel ministry.

However, 1 Tim 4:14 reads: "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of

the presbytery.” This passage seems to suggest that the young Timothy received his gift through the laying on of hands by the council of elders. If this is so, the question arises, was Timothy devoid of a spiritual gift before the laying on of hands? Has he received anything supernatural via the laying on of hands? Timothy was charged to devote himself to public reading of Scripture, to preaching, and to teaching (v.12). Does it imply that Timothy was lacking that specific gift? It is a known fact that ministers usually come into the ministry on the basis of the gifts they are endowed with. Is anything wrong with the translation of this passage?

The transliteration of the Greek text is as follows: *Mē amelei tou en soi charismatos ho edothē soi dia prophēteias meta epitheseōs tōn cheirōn tou presbyteriou (BGT)*. Let us look at some key Greek words such as *charisma*, *edothē*, and *meta*. The Greek word *dōrea*, “gift,” is a general term. It differs from *charisma*, a term applied to the more specific gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4). *Edothē* is a verb used here in the indicative aorist passive 3rd person singular. It derives from the infinitive *didōmi*. This is rightly translated as “it/he/she was given”. The preposition *meta* goes either with the genitive or the accusative. When used genitively, it means “with,” but accusatively, it is translated “after”. Thus, it would not be out of order to assert that Timothy received the authentication of the gift that was latent and dormant in him upon the laying on of hands. Based on this brief words study, it is fair to affirm that the translation of 1 Tim 4:14 is rightly rendered by the KJV. Having said that, it may be inferred that Timothy received a quickening of his *charisma* “gift” to operate in the manner spelt out in vv. 11-13. Nothing suggests that Timothy received some supernatural endowment. So, a superficial reading of 1 Tim 4:14 appears to be misleading. Considering the foregoing, it would be in order to give a second thought to Berkhof’s argumentation.

On par with Berkhof, Joe Morris Doss argues that nowhere is the dynamic and relational ontological reality more certain and more clear than in trying to understand that “ontological character” is conferred in the act of ordination (Doss, 2002, p. 201; see also Forde, 1984, p. 229; Humphrey, 2000, p.74). Miroslav Volf evokes a seal of the spirit bestowed in ordination (1998, p. 110). Some scholars believe that ordination is a transformative rite which changes the very being and life of the community through the establishment of new webs and networks of relations (Pickard, 2009, p. 161). This argument raises major concern as to know how possible it is for the

laying on of hands on a minister to affect his members—and to a larger extent the whole community. Other scholars argue that an ontological change occurs in a specialized sense in the lives of men and women at ordination (Sprinkle, 2004, p. 40).

Nonetheless, it is believed that nothing indelible is imparted to them; rather, they undergo a change in their “way of being” or in their “order of life”. To some still, ordination was understood to be the occasion of receiving as well as publicly recognizing a gift of grace that enabled the recipient to exercise pastoral and sacramental functions in the church (Hawkins, 1978, p. 301).

This brief overview reveals that something ontological is conferred in one way or the other in the process of ordination. Though some of these views are not fully substantiated by their authors, it remains that they have not been made in a vacuum. The next point in our discussion aims at challenging the ontological asset of ordination.

### **B. Ordination as Functionally-Oriented**

Generally speaking, whenever the New Testament does speak of a laying on of hands in connection with an appointment, the context does not suggest that some new gift was being received, or that the ceremony communicated to the recipient a new status or a new quality of life. Simply put, the ceremony of the laying on of hands does not produce a "clergy" which had gifts, status, or a quality of life differing from those found in "lay" people. Nonetheless, if you are ordained, you are expected by society to be different, to be a better person and to have a higher moral center in which others take refuge. What then does ordination confer or bring to the ordained person? This question remains a bone of contention in theological spheres among theologians, pastors, and scholars—even within the SDA Church. The issue at stake is whether ordination has an impact on the recipient, given that it is central to the Gospel ministry. Without its centrality to the ministry, it would not be a subject of interest in Christendom. It is undeniable that ordination comes with privileges; however, the contention revolves around the nature of what it confers to the beneficiary.

Some scholars postulate that the very question of whether ordination is to be understood in ontological or functional terms is not only misleading but absolutely impossible to raise in a theological perspective (Zizioulas, 1985, p. 226). Notwithstanding this view, the

Protestant Churches in general—unlike the Catholic Church—hold that ordination is a symbolical indication of the fact that one is set aside for the ministerial office in the Church (Berkhof, 1976, p. 588). Though they recognize it as a scriptural rite and as one that is appropriate, they do not consider it as absolutely necessary. The Presbyterian Church, for instance, makes it optional. Further, Reformation Christians, with the exception of Anglicans, have emphasized the functional approach to ordination. Said differently, ordination is aimed at empowering the ordinand in the work he or she is doing. In fact, Martin Luther was unambiguous by stating that ordination established an individual into an office but did not convey certain powers to the individual himself. Interestingly, the views of Luther seem to be espoused by many Protestants. Susan K. Wood refutes any idea that the ordained person is raised to a superior ontological level of being through ordination (2000, p. 74). In the same vein, Daniel L. Migliore argues that ordination is properly understood missiologically rather than ontologically (2004, p. 297. See also Hendricks, 2009, 1-32). That is, ordination is not a mysterious change of ontological status elevating the person ordained over other Christians. He concludes that to be ordained is to be commissioned and authorized to a particular task in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The *Seventh-day Adventist Minister's handbook* states that ordination and commissioning do not confer some special character trait or power or the ability to formulate doctrine; neither do they convey special powers upon the recipient (Ministerial Association of the Seventh-day Adventists, 2009, pp. 86-87). Writing on the meaning and purpose of ordination, Koranteng-Pipim (2001, p. 130) had this to say:

The New Testament teaches that the act of ordination, as such, does not confer any special grace or holiness upon the one ordained. Ordination does not bestow some special magical powers of the Holy Spirit; neither does it confer upon the elder or pastor some special character which sets the person apart as a priest.

If the three parameters of biblical ordination (i.e., selection, ritual, and cultic responsibility) proposed by Bediako are accepted, then the appointment of the twelve disciples of Jesus (Matt 10: 1-4; Mark 3: 13-19; Luke 6: 12-16) qualifies as ordination. A few examples from

the lives of these disciples and other apostles suffice to prove that ordination gives nothing ontological to the ordained person. First, Peter could not stand the heat of temptation, which results in the denial of his Master Jesus (Matt 26: 69-75; Mark 14: 66-72; Luke 22: 54-62; John 18 15-18, 25-27). James and his brother John, though ordained, could not overcome their character defect that tagged them as “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17). Judas Iscariot could not overcome the demon of cupidity. The end result was that he ended up selling the savior of the world (Matt 26: 47-56; Mark 14: 43-52; Luke 22: 47-53; John 18:1-18). Even Paul and Barnabas, shortly after their ordination at Antioch (Acts 13: 2-3), had a stern dissension that caused them to split up (Acts 15: 37-40). Obviously, the act of ordination did not make these servants of God some kind of “supermen”. Consequently, Koranteng-Pipim ensues that ordination, per se, does not make anyone spiritual, holy or spirit filled. This deduction raises the following question: what, then, is the *raison d’être* (i.e., the purpose of being) of ordination? Again, Koranteng-Pipim (2001, pp. 131-132; see also Dederen, 153) has this to say:

Ordination, an act of commission, acknowledges God’s call, sets the individual apart, and appoints that person to serve the Church in a special capacity. Ordination endorses the individuals thus set apart as authorized representatives of the church. By this act, the Church delegates its authority to its ministers to proclaim the gospel publicly, to administer its ordinances, to organize new congregations, and, within the parameters established by God’s word, to give direction to the believers (Matt 16:19; Heb 13: 17).

Besides, the conclusion of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee parallels that of Koranteng-Pipim in the sense that the Committee equally views the act of ordination as functional. It states that, “In the act of ordination the church confers representative authority upon individuals for the specific work of ministry to which they are appointed. These may include representing the church; proclaiming the gospel; administering the Lord’s Supper and baptism; planting and organizing churches; guiding and nurturing members; opposing false teachings; and providing general service to the congregation.”(Kellner, 2013, para. 3). Contrasting the SDA understanding of Ordination with other Christian faiths, the Committee further avers that the SDA ordination “neither conveys

special qualities to the persons ordained nor introduces a kingly hierarchy within the faith community.” (Ibid. para. 4).

The importance of ordination cannot be gainsaid since the practice is traceable from the Scriptures ( Exod 24:1; Lev 8-9; Num 8: 5-26; 11: 16, 24-25; Deut 16: 18; 21:2; Josh 23:2; 24: 1; 1 Sam 10: 1; 1 Kgs 19: 16-21; Acts 6:6; 8:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). It follows that the query as to whether ordination is worth performing is not an issue at stake in this study.

The foregoing discourse constitutes a case against the ontological understanding of what ordination confers to the ordained person. In other words, it has attempted to show that ordination does not give anything special to the recipient enabling him to be more holy or different from others. In fact, the ordained person remains the same in his being just as before the ordination ceremony. Yet, ordination is essential in the gospel ministry because it has a functional significance. It gives authorization and a moral right to represent the church and to perform all rites and ordinances. In a nutshell, ordination has the vocation of expanding the territory (i.e., it gives more ecclesiastic powers) of the recipient rather than effecting an existential metamorphosis in him.

#### **IV. Synthesis of the Analysis**

This investigation has required a setting of platform for a focused discussion. The exercise has revealed a plethora of definitions. Actually, there is no Hebrew or Greek word that equates the word ordination. Nevertheless, a working definition puts ordination as a setting apart through the laying on of hands of an individual to a particular office who is henceforth invested with powers to act on behalf of the Church. It was established that ordination has a solid biblical foundation since there are precedents in the Scriptures (Exod 24:1; Lev 8-9; Num 8: 5-26; 11: 16, 24-25; Deut 16: 18; 21:2; Josh 23:2; 24: 1; 1 Sam 10: 1; 1 Kgs 19: 16-21; Acts 6:6; 8:17; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). Further, the importance of the practice cannot be overestimated in the context of Christian ministry.

Turning to the focal point of this study, the following can be insightful. The quest to know what is conferred to the ordinand at ordination is justified. In fact, much and sometimes too much is expected of the ordained person. Society in general and the church in particular seem to have the perception that some supernatural powers

are passed on to the minister through the act of ordination. What actually happens to the recipient? Resolving this interrogation showcases the “ontological” versus “functional” dilemma. Could it nevertheless be possible to evade such a stalemate? The answer cannot be sure since the Bible does not provide us with a systematic theology of ordination. Similar cases favor speculations. Many are of the view that ordination gives the recipient supernatural powers that initiates an inner transformation of the individual. Those who uphold this worldview are often demanding and intolerant towards erring ministers. Socially speaking, however, the ordained person is held in high esteem in the society. On the other hand, some jettison the ontological understanding of ordination. They argue that effecting an ontological change does not fall within the “province” of ordination. Thus they maintain that ordination is meant to confer more prerogatives to the ordained person. In other words, ordination authorizes the recipient to function more effectively in the office he occupies. Ordination makes the ordained person an official representative of the Church or the community of faith to whom he is accountable to. This study acknowledges the dicey character of the functional-ontological dilemma. Nonetheless, it makes a bold move to favor a functional merit of ordination.

## **V. Conclusion**

This paper has embarked on a theological survey aiming at discovering what is actually conferred to a person at ordination. Arriving at this end has necessitated some preliminaries that offered impetus to pursue this investigation. If there is a general consensus somewhat about the biblical foundation of ordination, views are widely divided on the ontology of the ordained person. It has been established that dealing with such a delicate issue leads to an unavoidable dilemma. This impasse centers on whether the impact of ordination should be construed ontologically or otherwise. Many have held that ordination changes the ontological make-up of the recipient by virtue of some supernatural powers conferred to him. Conversely, other scholars view ordination as a mere human recognition. Furthermore, they contend that nothing is bestowed on the ordained person through the act of ordination—it does not make anyone more holy. Thus, they perceive the practice as meant to grant the recipient

more privileges coupled with a full authorization to function more effectively on behalf of the church. Based on the concise review of scholarly standpoints together with the few biblical prototypes mentioned here, this study concludes that ordination does not have any effect on the ontology of the ordained person. The benefits of ordination are therefore to be understood functionally rather than ontologically.

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