



ORDINATION OF PROTESTANT DEACONS AND OTHER NON-CLERGY PERSONS

CULTURAL RESOURCES



PHOTO: Transformation Ministries First Baptist Church
Charlottesville, VA—Ordination Service—July 13, 2008

Sunday, March 7, 2010

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I. Introduction

The liturgical rite to ordain clergy and deacons is well known in the African American church experience. Whether done on an annual basis or, in the case of many churches, when there are simply enough people who have been called to Christian ministry, ordination is an important part of the church experience. When the church ordains, it is essentially setting apart certain individuals for service in accordance with their call of God. I recall the last ordination service I experienced at my church, for it was my own

ordination as a minister of the church. The excitement leading up to that day, whether from the “church mother” who has seen you grow up, or from family and close friends, or even church members in general, was easily observable. In my church, ministers and deacons are ordained in separate services, at a different time of the year. In either case, one need not be experienced in vocational ministry to clearly see the magnitude of the event and celebration.

With respect to deacons, the Apostle Paul clearly expresses certain qualifications. They were to be individuals of quality and moral character. The scriptural narrative gives a basis for measuring the acceptability of ordination candidates, this much is clear. Yet, within the black churches, less attention is paid to the ordination of non-clergy. That is to say, the assessment, acknowledgement, and installation of qualified non-clergy who fill equally important ministerial roles within the church often goes unnoticed. Paul, however, seems to give precedence for the ordination, or at least formal acknowledgement, of teachers on the same level as more formal vocational ministerial positions (Eph 4:11).

Instructing that God through Christ has given to some the gifts of apostleship, prophecy, and evangelism, in conjunction with being a pastor and teaching, says something about the importance of teaching and the weight of its contribution to the Christian church. Thus, Christian Education leaders should also be set aside as persons offering immeasurable service to the church and so should those who lead Evangelism/Discipleship ministries and Youth Ministries.

Although I also advocate that those who lead Evangelism/Discipleship ministries should be ordained, given the major role of Christian Education in the church (it undergirds all other ministries in the church), the majority of this cultural resource unit will be spent advocating that Christian Education leaders should be ordained.

II. Historical Considerations for Ordination of Christian Education Leaders

While absent from the forefront of the majority of African American churches, Christian Education has been an issue of discussion and debate (with respect to its significance) for some time. An example of early discussions regarding the effects and the importance of Christian Education in the black church came during the formative years of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. The Baptist National Education Convention, organized in 1893, functioned independently as an organized body addressing the various components of African American Christian education. During that 1893 convention, led by Rev. W. Bishop Johnson of Washington, D.C., the representatives from several churches across the United States primarily sought to address the education of black clergy and missionaries. Their ultimate goal was to equal the educational playing field for those long denied formal Christian education. Upon the establishment of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. in 1895, the Education Convention became one of its three major auxiliaries, along with Foreign Missions and Home Missions.

The reality of Christian Education forming one of the three main components of the initial consolidated convention, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. (it would also be a significant feature of the second predominantly African American Baptist convention, the National Baptist Convention of America), speaks to the importance placed on the Christian education of a people for whom literacy had historically been withheld. It was through the church that many early African Americans gained even a semblance of literacy. Accordingly, as the black church grew, Christian education of the church body would become a paramount factor for the growth of the church, notably in the pre-Civil Rights era.

After this point, it seemed that the general increase in educated blacks coincided with a sharp decline in Christian education programs in black churches. What seems most clear is that, beyond the smaller scale Sunday school class model, formal Christian Education programs were reserved primarily for larger black churches. Thus, it is easy to see why the issue of non-clergy ordination as related to Christian education teachers is too often overlooked. However, it remains an issue of seminal importance.

III. Autobiographical Reflection

The truth is that the mere idea of a Christian Education program is foreign to many black churches. At the core of the argument regarding the necessity of Christian Education programs in predominantly black churches is the issue of tradition. A pastor I know cringes at the notion of holistic and pervasive Christian Education in the church. According to him, good old Sunday school is all the black church needs, not some “program” or “institute” that makes the church seem like a college. He wouldn’t even dream of assigning a book that had to be purchased, even for a nominal cost or even if it was free. It remains unclear to me whether his consternation is due to his traditional understanding of what church “should” be or due to a concern about what it would take to establish a successful Christian education program in his church.

My seminary is attempting address this issue and pastoral concern head on by establishing formal connections between its professors and small local churches who either cannot support or, for a myriad of reasons, will not conceive of a Christian Education program within their church. Accordingly, our professors make formal relational connections with local churches, assess these church’s Christian education needs and desires, and create appropriate classes that would function as part of any larger Christian Education curriculum. The formal support and resources the seminary places behind such an endeavor speaks to the importance of Christian Education as a call and the necessity of ordaining those within the local church who have received this call.

Any questions I personally had regarding whether or not Christian Education leaders should be ordained ended while I was on ministry staff at a church in Houston, Texas. In this church of about 4,000 people, we had a person hired and paid a salary strictly for the purpose of creating and heading a Christian Education program at our predominantly African American church. She was seminary educated with a double master’s degree. She exhibited a great passion for Christian Education (C.E.) and, though young in age

and ministry experience at the time, put together an entire C.E. curriculum for our church. Her plan required that anyone who taught in the church's C.E. institute take a ten-week teacher training course offered at the church. On any given week, one would find classes being held on Sunday mornings between services and on weeknights between Monday and Thursday. Her ultimate ordination at our church, not known for ordaining women, was due in part to her tireless service, her obvious and proven call, and superior capabilities.

Could she have been successful without ordination? Certainly! But by ordaining her the church, notably our pastor, affirmed the significance of her call as a Christian Education practitioner. Whenever asked about why she chose to "specialize" in C.E., she would quickly tell you that she didn't choose it but rather God chose her and gifted her to do it. She maintains that she sought to know what her calling was, was open to being used in whatever way, and patiently waited for confirmation.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

These songs speak to the nature of the call to Christian Education ministry I described above. The ideas of seeking, openness to be used, as well as patiently and attentively letting God minister to one's desire to know God's plan for his or her life is the basis for service that is acknowledgeable for ordination, even non-clergy ordination.

I Sought the Lord

I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me.
It was not I that found, O Savior true;
no, I was found of thee.

Thou didst reach forth thy hand and mine enfold;
I walked and sank not on the storm-vexed sea.
'Twas not so much that I on thee took hold,
as thou, dear Lord, on me.

I find, I walk, I love, but oh, the whole
of love is but my answer, Lord, to thee!
For thou wert long beforehand with my soul;
always thou lovedst me.¹

Use Me Lord

Use me Lord for whatever you need me to do;
channel my life and help me to do your will,
make me an instrument of your loving kindness.

Take my life, take my life,
invade me, fill me, transform me.
Take my life, take my life,

use me Lord.

Mold me and make me
to be just what you'd have me be,
oh let me be your instrument, Lord use me.

Use me Lord.²

Let the Lord Minister To Ya

While I was in the spirit,
God showed me some things,
He told me some things, revealed some things.

While I was in the spirit,
God pointed out some things that I needed to know...

If you need to know God's plan for your life,
get in the spirit, let the Lord minister to ya.

While I was in the spirit,
God changed some things,
He explained things, arranged some things.

While I was in the spirit,
God broke down some things in my life that needed to go.
Have you ever been broken before the Lord,
you were down on your knees,
you were wondering which way to go?

Oh, Lord minister to me;
I say yes, I say yes.

Oh, Lord minister to me;
I say yes, I say yes.

If you need to know God's plan for your life,
get in the spirit, say yes.³

V. Prose Reflection for this Lectionary Moment

Churches: A Crisis of Mission

“It is understandable that denominations have not required formal graduate theological education, but it is not acceptable that they are not moving in that direction.”⁴

Notes

1. "I Sought the Lord." Text: Anonymous, Music: George W. Chadwick
2. "Use Me Lord." By Daryl Logan
3. "Let the Lord Minister to Ya." By Donald Lawrence
4. Franklin, Robert M. Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. p. 137.