

Voices: The significance of ordination

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On July 28, I was ordained to the gospel ministry by First Baptist Church in Waco. It was a beautiful and intimate ceremony also attended by several members from the congregation I currently serve as pastor—Trinity Baptist Church in Orange—and several friends from the Waco area.

But what is ordination, exactly? What does it mean? What does the Bible say about ordination? These are important questions, especially since the Baptist tradition historically has not been of one mind on the issue. For example, Charles Spurgeon—one of my theological heroes—was opposed to ordination.

Most Christians view ordination as a sacred ritual that confers a perpetual “special spiritual status” upon the one who is ordained, which in turn qualifies them to serve as a pastor or deacon, to preach, and to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper, among other things. But I want to articulate a different view.

Ordination in the New Testament

Robert Creech, in his book *Pastoral Theology in the Baptist Tradition*, argues: “Founding the ‘ceremony’ ... of ordination on biblical examples or teachings cannot be done confidently” (p. 50). Creech also quotes David Garland, who says, “There is a lack of any evidence of an ordained ministry in Paul’s churches” (p. 54, note 13).

These are bold claims, but I would argue they are essentially correct. If we operate with the definition of “ordination” I present above, we will find no

texts in the New Testament that teach ordination.

There are several key texts that describe the qualifications and job description of pastors and deacons—such as Acts 20:17, 28-31; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Peter 5:1-5. None of these texts present a special “ordination process” or unique ceremony prerequisite for serving in these roles.

The Baptist biblical scholar Benjamin Merkle [argues](#) the closest thing to “ordination” in the New Testament is the actual event of “being publicly installed into that office [pastor or deacon]” in a local church, but such installation does not confer a “sacred, priestly” status on church officers.

There also are various passages in the New Testament in which different individuals are “set apart” or “appointed” for specific ministries by the laying on of hands and prayer—such as Acts 6:1-6; 13:3; 1 Timothy 4:14; 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6. But these passages are all relatively vague and allusive; they do not give the level of detail necessary to justify the view of ordination described in the introduction to this article.

Careful study of Scripture reveals a biblical precedent for local churches publicly to recognize, bless and pray for specific Christians in their ministries. But there is no clear biblical mandate for a distinct “ordination ceremony” conferring an ongoing “special spiritual status” upon its recipients.

A theology of ordination

Since there is a relatively broad biblical precedent for churches to publicly recognize, bless and pray for specific Christians in their ministries, it is not out of bounds for a local church to “commission” or “set apart” someone through the laying on of hands and prayer.

One could understand ordination as a local church taking a specific believer who is being called to a specific ministry and officially, publicly blessing that believer and his or her ministry. Ordination in this sense is not the conferral of an ongoing special status but is essentially the church's public statement that, "We believe this believer is called and qualified by God to serve the church in this way, and we endorse them as they pursue this path God has laid for them."

The ordination service itself takes this public statement and puts it in the context of worship. This is no mere letter of endorsement or newsletter announcement. Rather, this is a deep and spiritually significant occasion, covered in prayer, saturated with the word of God, and focused on the worship of Christ.

Many Baptist churches already do something similar. For example, local churches often lay hands on and pray for a missionary or group of missionaries before they head out. Ordination can function in essentially the same way.

For a local church, performing ordination provides a way to recognize and honor the ministry work being done within and even more so beyond one particular congregation. For example, when First Baptist Church in Waco ordained me, they were saying to Trinity Baptist Church in Orange, "We want to share publicly in the love and support you have for your pastor."

My ordination journey

I did not seek ordination from First Baptist in Waco because I believed it was necessary for me to serve as a pastor. I did not seek ordination because I wanted to receive some "special status" that elevated me above other Christians and granted me a set of unique, perpetual privileges.

I sought ordination because I deeply love First Baptist in Waco and desired

their public blessing on my ministry. I was a member of First Baptist in Waco for several years, during and immediately after my time in seminary. I taught Sunday school there. I completed a pastoral internship under Joshua Hays there. I served in college ministry with Ryan Russell there. I helped with children's ministry alongside Robin Priddy there.

First Baptist in Waco was my church home during multiple personal tragedies in the summer of 2019. First Baptist in Waco was my church home during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 to 2021. But I knew I couldn't and wouldn't stay at First Baptist in Waco forever. So, in a sense akin to Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord, my attitude toward the church was, "I won't let you go until you bless me!"

As God's kind providence would have it, several members from Trinity Baptist Church in Orange and several dear friends from my time in Waco were able to join First Baptist in Waco in publicly affirming, celebrating and supporting the ministry to which God has called me. In a beautiful twist of providence, even my pastor from my college years back in Missouri was there.

When First Baptist Church in Waco—with help from Trinity Baptist Church in Orange and several of my friends—ordained me on July 28, what I wanted and what I received was a public statement saying: "We believe Joshua is called and qualified by God to serve the church in this way, and we endorse him as he pursues this path God has laid for him."

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