

# Anyone still for Ordination?

## Paul Goodliff

*Baptist Minister, Head of Ministry at the Baptist Union of Great Britain and tutor in Liturgy and Christian Doctrine at the University of Gloucestershire's Open Theological College*

This edition of *Ministry Today* celebrates the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of its long-standing founder editor, Paul Beasley-Murray. Many ministers celebrate this significant milestone, but few while still leading a large church and continuing to practise ministry full-time, while anticipating doing so for a while longer. But then, Paul has never been an 'average' minister! Among the most important things that I want to say about Paul is that I count him my friend, and so readers of this article will need to understand that the reason I accepted the offer to contribute to this edition of *Ministry Today* is that it gives me this opportunity to pay tribute to my friend Paul's varied and significant ministry.

I first encountered Paul as a second year ministerial student at Spurgeon's College, where Paul had just become Principal. Following missionary service in Zaire with the Baptist Missionary Society, into which office he had been ordained, Paul had arrived at Spurgeon's College following a successful ministry at Altrincham Baptist Church, where church growth principles had been applied with great effect.

I concluded my ministerial formation at Spurgeon's College with Paul as Principal, and settled back into full time pastoral ministry at Streatham Baptist Church in South London, from which I had entered college as a church-based student (I and Martin Taylor were experimental pioneers of this type of training, now ubiquitous). Late in that first post-ordination year as a probationer minister, Paul called out of the blue and asked if I would consider stepping in to a year-long role as a half-time tutor at College, as a combination of sabbaticals and other commitments had opened up a gap in the teaching responsibilities. I and the church said 'yes', and there began a strand in my life that has continued to this day. I have always had a stake in theological education, variously at Spurgeon's, St John's Nottingham and currently at the University of Gloucestershire's Open Theological College. I owe that opening

to Paul's risk in taking on a very raw theological educator, who was often just one week ahead of his students!

As I completed that year on faculty, Paul encouraged me to further study, and so I signed up for the King's College MTh in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Systematic Theology under Professor Colin Gunton, and so another strand of my ministry was birthed under the encouragement of Paul: yet another strand that has continued to this day, having just completed a doctorate.

It came as no surprise, then, to be asked by Paul to join the Board of the fledgling *Richard Baxter Institute for Ministry (RBIM – now Ministry Today)* twenty years ago. To begin with, the Board was all there was, but what stimulating meetings they were as we discussed ministry and its practice. Soon, the journal was published, and I contributed the occasional article and book review. Thus, another strand of my life was fostered and I owe a debt to Paul in encouraging a writing ministry. I have never been able to keep up with Paul's prodigious output, but at three books and counting, his example of writing as ministry has always been an inspiration to me.

I believe that Paul's most significant ministry will prove to be his current one: Senior Minister of Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford. I was on the RBIM Board throughout the early years of Paul's ministry at 'VRS', as it was known in those days ('Victoria Road South Baptist Church'... what a mouthful). Those were years of profound change in the church, not without their personal cost to Paul, and his vision, courage and, I suspect, sheer 'bloody-mindedness' led the church to its current significant life and witness to the city of Chelmsford. Paul, dressed like a county gentleman in tweed, bright tie and a silk handkerchief in his jacket pocket, or in a navy pin-stripped suit with outrageous red lining, looking every inch the city banker, is a sight to behold. Not for him the kind of casual slovenliness that so disfigures some of our colleagues! Paul, in full flight preaching the gospel with power and good humour, is an experience to remember, while Paul doing what every pastor does, visiting the recently bereaved or the sick in hospital, is, for the recipients of his pastoral care, the vehicle through which God draws close. Of course, Paul is not perfect (no, you're not, Paul) and he can be outrageous, opinionated and sometimes 'puts his foot in it', but better that, I think, than the

ineffectual and the boring (qualities I see in abundance amongst some of our ministerial colleagues).

So, invited to contribute, I accepted and I want to reflect upon one area of Paul's writing that began early on. *Anyone for Ordination?*<sup>58</sup> was edited by Paul and consisted of writers from various traditions of the Church writing about ordination. Paul contributed the chapter on Baptists<sup>59</sup>. I want to return to this area of Paul's interests for a number of reasons. It's the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Paul's own ordination at South Norwood Baptist Church, so a paper on ordination seems appropriate. I have just published my doctoral thesis on Baptist ministry and ordination<sup>60</sup>, so it is a theme that has absorbed my thinking for the past four years, and as Head of Ministry at the Baptist Union I am supposed to know about these things. In September of this year my eldest son, Andrew, is to be ordained a Baptist minister as he takes up pastoral ministry, and I have the enormous privilege of preaching on that occasion. So, some reflection upon ordination would be good (as General Superintendent of the Central Area of the Baptist Union, I presided at many an ordination, but rarely preached at them, and now, while I never preside, I occasionally am invited by the ordinand to preach)!

Turning first to Paul's contribution to the book on ordination which he edited, it becomes clear that Paul identifies one strand of Baptist thought that emphasises a particular understanding of the 'priesthood of all believers,' the radical equality of the members of the Church that minimises anything that smacks of clericalism or sacerdotalism. Priesthood of all believers has become something of a totemic phrase for Baptists, and even the least theologically literate will remind us that 'Baptists believe in the priesthood of all believers.' It must be said that Paul is clear that while the call to follow Christ is the call of every believer, not every believer is called to the ministry of pastoral leadership, or, to use another term, the 'ministry of word and sacrament'. It is this specific call that is recognised for those whom we call Baptist Ministers, or

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, (ed) *Anyone for Ordination?* (Tunbridge Wells: Marc Europe, 1993)

<sup>59</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *The Ministry of All and the Leadership of Some*, in *Anyone for Ordination*, (Tunbridge Wells: Marc Europe, 1993) pp. 157-174

<sup>60</sup> Paul W. Goodliff, *Ministry, Sacrament and Representation*, (Oxford, Regent's Park College, 2010)

Accredited Ministers (and with which Methodists, most Anglicans and Reformed Christians would also agree). Properly understood, this is what is implied in the phrase ‘priesthood of all believers’ as Luther intended. It means: (i) that access to God through Christ in the Spirit is not mediated through a priestly class, but that all can come to God without the necessity of human intervention (thus rejecting sacerdotalism); (ii) every believer has a call upon their life, and, although not all are called to pastoral leadership expressed by the term ‘ministry’, all are called to service in a specific sphere appointed by Christ, be that as a nurse, businesswoman, postman, or whatever (and by this I want to affirm the title of Paul’s chapter, ‘The Ministry of all....’); and (iii) it is corporately as the gathered church that ‘believers’ constitute the ‘royal priesthood’. It does not mean, as is sometimes implied, that every believer is the same in their calling. In this sense, the church of Jesus Christ is not radically egalitarian: all are most definitely not the same. While there is no hierarchy in that calling, so that somehow ‘ministry’ is a higher or more noble calling than others, it is the special preserve of the Church to affirm and recognise that calling, just as other bodies recognise the ‘calling’ to be a lawyer, a surgeon or a social worker (if they did but recognise that through them God is at work!).

This radical identification of the invitation to every believer to respond to the call to service embodied in baptism, and expressed in the specific sphere or way of life that God has called them to, is what Luther meant, and is how Paul understands it. The alternatives are a lax cult of the amateur where ministry is concerned, as if years of formation and training count for very little, and which Paul would want very definitely to reject in one of his most widely admired books, *A Call to Excellence*,<sup>61</sup> written with the young pastor in mind.

“Where excellence is a constant pursuit in the practice of ministry, there growth and development amongst pastors take place. It is my conviction that this is the key to coping with the inevitable challenges of ministry.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Beasley-Murray, *A Call to Excellence. An Essential Guide to Christian Leadership* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995)

<sup>62</sup> *idem*.p.6

Another alternative that Paul most definitely would want to reject is that form of clericalism that looks to the clergy to 'do' the ministry of the Church, with the members of the congregation passive observers of what he or she does. The proper New Testament response to this way of doing church (one that renders the Body of Christ victim to a form of pernicious anaemia) is to remember that the Church is to be a body of active members. The phrase that best expresses this is 'every member ministry', although I would challenge the tendency to conflate both service and ministry in such a way as to become profligate in the use of 'ministry' so that, in terms of the ordained it loses all content. I do not think it helpful to have at the back of a church on its notice board something like 'Minister: every member.' I suspect Paul would take issue with this point. But then ministry as 'chaplaincy to the congregation', where it is absorbed by meeting the needs of those who are already members, while ignoring the call to bear witness to Christ and lead the church in its mission to the wider community, is equally damaging to the life of a congregation.

So, if every member is called to serve Christ in that sphere of life to which God has appointed them, and if in our Baptist polity there is nothing that a minister regularly does that any duly recognised and appointed church member could not (such as preside at the Lord's Table, or conduct a baptism, wedding or funeral), then is there any significance in ordination? If we reject both clericalism and sacerdotal tendencies in ministry, are we left with the option that a few Baptist ministers adopt of refusing ordination altogether?

In Paul's view, starting from the 'obvious', that 'all God's people are called to ministry',<sup>63</sup> he identifies 'the concept of every-member-ministry, along with the related doctrine of the priesthood of all believers'<sup>64</sup> at the heart of Baptist ecclesiology. Thus, the 'ministry roll' of the church should be its membership roll. However, the distinguishing mark of those whom the church ordains is leadership, and while those whom the church appoints as leaders will not be exclusively the ordained, the distinction between those who are ordained and other leaders lies in 'calling

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<sup>63</sup> 'The Ministry of All & the Leadership of Some', in (ed) P. Beasley-Murray, P, *Anyone for Ordination?* (MARC, Tunbridge Wells, 1993), 157-174, 158

<sup>64</sup> *idem*, 159

and function.’<sup>65</sup> The pastor, or whatever term is used for the ordained person, is the leader of the leaders. The other characteristic of the ordained and accredited is the scope of their recognition, which is national.

The consequences of this understanding are fourfold: ordination is not to the ministry, and Paul considers it unfortunate that the term minister is used of the ordained, preferring ‘the functional term pastor,’<sup>66</sup> (and as a result eschews clerical dress and titles such as ‘Reverend’ as maintaining a false distinction between clergy and laity); ordination is not a means of special grace, or conferring any new status; it is not indelible, for if ‘ordination is primarily functional’<sup>67</sup> then it is possible to give up the function; and fourthly, ordination is not an initiation into priesthood. In this latter regard, he rejects both a sacramental priesthood and the Reformation understanding that ordination as a setting apart of a person to the ministry of Word and sacrament, on the basis once again of the ministry of the whole people of God. When a pastor preaches or baptises, they do so because they are ‘the trusted leader of God’s flock’<sup>68</sup> and it is important that churches do not encourage any false sacerdotalism, (thus he rejects the practice of the newly-ordained pronouncing the blessing at the close of their ordination service, or presiding at a celebration of the Lord’s Supper within the context of that service.)

In this understanding of ministry and ordination, Paul represents the functional understanding of ministry and ordination that predominated during the 1970s-1990s amongst evangelical Baptists. While its roots lay in an emphasis upon a ‘biblical’ understanding of the ministry of all, its expression owes much to the growing egalitarianism of British society during this period, with the consequent mistrust of ‘the expert’ or ‘professional’. ‘All are called to ministry’ soon collapses in some quarters into ‘everybody can do anything’, and the emphasis upon the ‘leadership of some’ is compromised by a misunderstanding of the priesthood of all believers to mean everybody could do ‘ministry’ (after all, it was not so difficult, was it?)

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<sup>65</sup> *idem*.162

<sup>66</sup> *idem* 164

<sup>67</sup> *idem* 166

<sup>68</sup> *idem* 168

Paul is nothing if not often controversial, so it seems appropriate therefore in this paper that begins by expressing my personal debt of gratitude to him, to do him the honour of disagreeing with him! There is at least one other understanding of ministry widely held amongst Baptist ministers today, particularly amongst a younger generation, if my research is accurate. It understands ordination as the moment when the Church and the Holy Spirit sets a person apart for a way of being, or a way of life, that is dedicated to pastoral leadership in the Church of Jesus Christ, which confers upon them the grace to fulfil that calling in response to the prayers of God's people, and that is sacramental in character. Many who hold to this understanding would not wish to go so far as to say that ordination is a sacrament (most Baptists, even the more sacramental in spirit, hold to just two, baptism and Holy Communion), but in the same way that God's grace is not mediated through the waters of baptism and bread and wine alone, but also through preaching, Scripture, our marriage partners and the believing prayers of God's people, to name but the more obvious, so, in the act of ordination, God, who is really present by his Spirit and responsive to the fervent prayers of his people who claim his promises, acts.

I know that there are some Baptists who, wrongly, believe that baptism is somehow an optional extra in the scheme of salvation, and who claim that all that is needed is faith on the part of the believer, but still the dominant conviction is that baptism is more than just a 'wet confirmation', and that God really changes something, seals something irrevocably in the baptised as they confess their faith, commit themselves to discipleship and are plunged beneath the waters. So, in ordination, God acts and changes something irrevocably in the man or woman whose call to ministry has been recognised and tested by the councils of the Church, both local and beyond; whose response to that call is to make solemn vows of faithfulness to that calling; upon whom hands are laid by representatives of the Church universal and for whom prayers for the enduement of the Spirit are offered and answered. As in the wedding service where the declaration 'I pronounce you man and wife' actually effects what it says, so I believe in ordination. The prayerful laying on of hands is more than just a quaint sign or a piece of liturgical theatre – it effects what it signifies: this man, this woman, is now set apart for service

in leadership of Christ's Church, and from this point onwards stands as a representative of the Church and of its Lord.

I know ordination can appear to be a sort of ecclesiastical 'passing out parade' (it's what happens when you leave theological college), or an induction into a particular churchmanship, be it low, broad or high, but such a reduced understanding robs the ordinand of the security that is one of ordination's purposes. It is said that Martin Luther, when sensing the temptations of the Devil would send him packing with 'be gone: I am baptised'. Similarly, the ordained minister when tempted to sin gravely, or to lose heart, or make shipwreck of their faith and ministry, can stand upon the assurance that this ministry 'malarkey' is not their own idea, or simply a job like any other, to be taken up or laid down as the fancy takes them, but is the calling of God. That calling is declared by God's people, confirmed by God's Spirit and sustained by God's grace, and the act of ordination signifies that.

Next time you are tempted to be unfaithful to your marriage partner, or insist upon your own way because you are the minister, or allow the siren voices of managerialism to deflect you from your true calling to bear the Word of God to God's people and to God's world, remember: you are ordained. You can live in faithfulness to its reality, striving for all of the excellence in ministry that Paul so eloquently explores in his *A Call to Excellence*, or you can live unfaithfully to its demands, and go and serve other gods. The one thing you cannot do, I believe, is un-ordain yourself, any more than you can un-baptise yourself.

So, Paul, we celebrate your ordination 40 years ago, and we delight in affirming that you have lived in faithful obedience to its demands these past 40 years, and pray you may do so for many more to come.