

## Doctrine Core Group

### Report

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In 2006, when I was asked to convene the Doctrine Core Group by the Nominating Committee, the following description was given of its role:

*“The Doctrine Core Group essentially plays a co-ordinating role. It receives requests from various sections of the church for a doctrinal response to a matter of interest. Most of these requests come though the Council of Assembly but other areas of the church may make requests from time to time. The Core Group is not required to be the sole respondent and may seek to allocate tasks requesting input and resources be made or supplied by others who have specific expertise in the area of the request. The core group co-ordinates the reception of requests, allocation of tasks and the response to the request...”*

We have operated on this basis since then. Our membership has consisted of Right Rev Dr Graham Redding, Rev Assoc Prof Murray Rae, Rev Chris Eliot and myself. Various practical considerations have slowed our progress. Graham Redding's election to Moderator meant that his time was limited. Murray Rae's new administrative roles as Dean of Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies limited his availability also. At the end of 2009 Chris Eliot resigned from her role in the group leaving just the three members in 2010.

The Council of Assembly and national committees and work groups have made very little use of the Doctrine Core Group. In recent years, we have received very few requests for doctrinal advice on matters being brought to the General Assembly for consideration.

Our main focus over recent years has been on resourcing the Church for a discussion about the nature and practice of ordination. An initial paper on the subject, authored by the Rev Allister Lane and Anne Stewart, provided a very useful starting point for our deliberations. From this, the Doctrine Core Group decided that we needed to address both the ordination of ministers of Word and Sacrament and, secondly, the ordination of elders. We offer the attached paper (Appendix 1: A Brief Theology of Ordination) to the Church as a resource, and invite feedback and comment as we continue to refine our thinking in this crucial area.

In various ways, members of our Doctrine Core Group have contributed to the theological reflection involved in the formation of the World Communion of Reformed Churches. The Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership hosted a Pacific Region Consultation in 2009, and Graham Redding suggested some changes to the proposed constitution, emphasising the centrality of worship and the non-sectarian nature of our theological contribution, as reformed churches, to wider theological understanding. These recommendations were accepted by the plenary of the Uniting General Council in June 2010. I attended that meeting in Graham's stead and contributed to the plenary discussion about the Constitution.

Despite the modest endeavours noted above, it is clear that the Doctrine Core Group is under-utilised and under-resourced. For it to function effectively it needs more members

and the Council of Assembly, national committees and task groups need to make better use of it.

**Bruce Hamill**

Convenor

## **Appendix 1: A Brief Theology of Ordination**

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The Reformed or Presbyterian tradition understands the church to be centred on and founded on Jesus Christ who is simultaneously the Word to whom the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament bear witness and the High Priest who leads and mediates our worship. As a consequence we take the ordination of people to the service ('ministry') of Word and Sacrament very seriously. We seek those who will make life-long vows and who have a sense, akin to the ancient prophets and confirmed by their brothers and sisters in Christ, of the call of God on their lives for this service.

### **Putting this Practice in Theological Context**

In order to appreciate the seriousness with which we take this practice of ordination we need to understand it in its broader theological context. We need an account of the nature of the Church and its place in God's relation to the world, and the place of Jesus Christ and the Spirit in all of this. If we do not understand ordination in this broader context we will very easily reduce our understanding of ordination to an organisational category. Where such theological thinking is absent the Church is commonly regarded as an organisation or club of people who just happen to share a common interest in spiritual matters. Such an organisation, like any other social group, requires order and leadership. According to this understanding, ordination is simply a category of leadership serving an organisational purpose. This view of church and ordination is neither Reformed nor orthodox.

Properly understood, Christianity tells a story not of an organisation called the Church but of the world in which the triune God is the primary agent, and of our involvement in that action. Thus in order to understand the seriousness with which we take ordination we need to at least tell the bare bones of the story of God's action, in which we find ourselves and order our lives.

The central event which generated and continues to generate the Church is cosmic in both nature and scope. It is an interruption of this world-order by the God who lives in freedom beyond this world-order. It is the event wherein the God of Israel – the radically transcendent God upon whom the whole universe depends for its very existence – raised the crucified Jesus from the nothingness of death and gave him back in forgiveness to those who had abandoned him in their own bondage to the sin of the world. It is also the event when, in similar manner, the Spirit of God makes this same Jesus present as God's transformative and forgiving self-donation into the history and lives of those human beings who knew him prior to his crucifixion. It is an event which, from this central moment and witness, establishes a movement whose trajectory is universal in orientation – to the ends of the earth – and inclusive even now of men, women and children whose lives are changed by Jesus Christ. This event is anticipated in the Old Testament and narrated and explicated in the New Testament. It is the event which turns the world upside-down because it creates a new world. Before it is anything

else, Church is a mode of participation in this event and in the new world inaugurated by it.

Thus understood the Church should never be regarded as a self-founded and self-sustaining phenomenon defined by its institutions and the actions of its participants. Rather it is created by the action of God from beyond itself. In fact it is created by the scandalously particular action of God in Jesus Christ to save the world. God is saving the world by interrupting history with the cruciform history of Jesus of Nazareth and is (by the Spirit who makes that history present) drawing human beings to participate in the life of Jesus Christ and thus in God's own life. The interruption of the risen-crucified one creates and reforms a new humanity. This new humanity is not a passive recipient of divine interruption, but, in the event of being interrupted by and undergoing this God, is sent (**missio**) and empowered to act in ways which correspond to the mission of the triune God.

### **Worship at the Generative Centre of Church**

Since humans are defined by what they love (Luke 10:27) and since the Church is constituted by the interruption of our identities and histories by Jesus Christ (in the power of the Spirit), we see worship as the central means of grace by which the Church is constituted and reformed by the triune God. By this we mean to say that certain practices (rather than church *per se*) are instituted by God. Central among these are the practices of Baptism and Holy Communion, both of which were instituted by Christ himself. These are indeed 'sacramental' institutions for the formation of missional church insofar as they crystallise and bring into sharpest focus the living presence of the One who is the true Sacrament, Jesus Christ. Those who worship Christ are conformed by the Spirit to his cruciform life and thus to the missional life of his body.

The practices of proclaiming (and attending to) the Word and administering (and partaking in) the Sacraments are not, however, purely about the formation of individual believers. Rather they play an integral role in the formation of a community of faith, which constitutes nothing less than a new political reality bearing witness to and embodying a new way of being in the world for the sake of the world. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests, it makes no more sense to ask why we should worship than to ask 'why one should love one's mother'<sup>1</sup>.

This politic and witness with all its missional character can never leave behind the worship that generates it. The Christian life is worship-dependent. Worship is the locus of interruption. Even though it may appear at times to be business as usual, if it is properly administered, worship is the practice of waiting for and responding to the interruption of our lives by the history of Jesus Christ. In this constant return and interruption we are recreated and sent by God.

### **Word and Sacrament at the Centre of Worship**

We need to say more about the practices gathered under the categories of 'Word' and 'Sacrament' which lie at the centre of worship and therefore of a missional church. Post-ascension the history of Jesus Christ is mediated to us by Holy Scripture. The apostolic witness has been given to us as an unavoidable link between the history of Jesus and

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio*, p227f., cited by Bernd Wannewetsch in *Political Worship: Ethics for Christian Citizens* (OUP, 2004) pp 24-25.

life of the Church. The scripture is *canon*. By this we mean that the rule of scripture subordinates the life of the body to its head. The link, which scripture is, is also *normative* for the church. The inspired human witness becomes the sacramental means by which the Spirit makes Jesus Christ present, addressing us in history and language. In this sense church is dependent on scripture. This Word in Scripture, and also (secondarily and dependently) in proclamation, is God's gift for our salvation.

The Reformed Church recognises two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion (or the Eucharist). Both arise from the memory of Christ's life and his commands to his disciples.

Baptism is the practice and sacrament of incorporation in which a person is given the sign of membership in the new life of Christ's body and the congregation of the body trusts the Spirit of God to bring that person into the fullness of life in Christ. As a sign it also symbolizes the new life which is a participation in Christ's own death and resurrection, and marks the entry into that life.

Eucharist is at the centre of our ongoing participation in the new life of Christ. It originated with a remarkable encapsulation by Jesus of his own calling towards death for the sake of the world, enacted prior to his own death. The command to remember him in this way with shared food, is thus a command to be formed regularly by his cruciform life. In maintaining this practice we trust that the Spirit will inform us in our innermost and outermost being – psychologically and politically – and so our meals will become celebratory anticipations of future divine hospitality.

The central place of Baptism and Eucharist depends first of all on their mandate in Christ's own command. However, together they constitute the sacramentality of initial and ongoing incorporation into Christ. Reinhold Hutter argues that there is an intrinsic complementarity to the pair – the complementarity of divine truth and hospitality.

In the proclamation of the Word, the hospitality of God's truth in Christ is announced and promised; in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, this hospitality is concretely remembered and tangibly received. God's own truth grants itself, enacts its own hospitality, whenever the gospel is proclaimed and the Lord's Supper is celebrated<sup>2</sup>.

### **Leadership and Ordination in the Body of Christ**

The previous section has argued that the mission of God to the world and the interruption of the world by Jesus involves people individually and together, personally and socio-politically, experiencing the hospitality of God's truth and being transformed by the truth of God's hospitality. This means that we are obliged to pay special attention to proper maintenance of the institutions of Word and Sacrament as the essence of worship, and the source of the politics of Jesus in the world.

In order to order our life with these institutions in their proper place we acknowledge and 'ordain' certain people to care for them as 'guardians of the gospel'. Their attention to the Word serves our attention to that Word. Their focus on the gospel, serves our sacramental participation in that same gospel. In doing so, they participate in leading the

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Hutter, *Bound to be Free: Evangelical Catholic Engagements in Ecclesiology, Ethics and Ecumenism* (Eerdmans, 2004), p 69.

Church, not because they exert their own will over others, but because these instituted practices form and shape the Church and move it into the future. By serving the gospel, as it is present in Word and Sacrament, they serve and also lead the community of Christ.

This leads us to an important point: Leadership in the body of Christ is primarily an indirect leadership. Its indirection lies in its reliance on given means of grace. The Body already has a head. Christ by the Spirit leads the church. Ministers of Word and Sacrament play a key role in 'equipping the saints' (2 Tim 3:17), because they have themselves been given 'equipment' instituted for the task and developed in the life of Christ's body through time. Ordained ministry points to Christ, not to the qualifications, skills and personality of the Minister. The ministry of Word and Sacrament is servant leadership not because Ministers serve the desires of the congregation, but because they serve the truest needs of the congregation for Word and Sacrament. Such service is both pastoral and prophetic.

Such ministry is also clearly missional, since the body formed by Word and Sacrament does not so much have a mission in and of itself, as it is a mission of God to the world. Its own activity is secondary to that process of 'undergoing God' which is the source of its life. However, because it is secondary in this way it is and becomes, in its politic as body, a divine engagement with the world. Rather than seeking to be relevant to the cultures which surround it, the Word-and-Sacrament-formed-body which is constantly participating in the cultural activities of its members will be simultaneously breaking open those cultural artifacts and historical forms and reordering them into the shape of Christ. This evolution is a divine *cultivation* of human life which is always and ever ongoing, not as a cumulative movement of progress but as a constant return to the centre in a battle with our fallen human orders.

In the light of this process of cultural transformation we note that the maintenance of Word and Sacrament by means of ordination to an 'office' with its modern connotations of democratic and formalized structure is merely one way in which this responsibility has been addressed. Historically speaking, as best we can determine, leadership by Word and Sacrament was originally the responsibility of apostles and then of elders (presbuteroi) and overseers (episcopoi). The form which leadership took emerged in the context of the household<sup>3</sup>. Here forms of leadership were already in place quite independently of any office or ordination. Thus the particularly Christian forms of leadership developed out of a dialectical relationship with the cultural context of the house church – a culture under transformation – in which the private was being formed into its own 'public'. The two terms (presbyteroi and episcopoi) were originally somewhat vague and interchangeable and were titles of seniority (spiritual and biological) and honour rather than offices to which people were elected or ordained. The patron of the house provided spiritual leadership for the congregation and when various house churches acted together the plural leadership of the elders (presbyteroi) referred to a gathering of household leaders. At some point in this development, for the sake of unity, the church started to appoint single leaders from among the elders/overseers in a given town – a leading overseer from among the overseers/elders.

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<sup>3</sup> For an extensive and respected monograph on the house-church as the social context out of which the role of elders (presbyteroi) emerged see Alastair Campbell, *Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, (T&T Clark 1994).

Moreover what we can glean of modes of leadership and authority from the New Testament reveals that the early Pauline house churches did not develop in a uniform way or at a similar rate towards institutional forms of office. What we find in later biblical literature is evidence of diverse forms of leadership and only the beginnings of institutionalization by the time we get to the Pastoral Epistles<sup>4</sup>. The letters of John for instance, from a similar period (or even later) evidence a church audience in which leadership and authority does not rely on institutions of office, but predominantly on the whole congregation and to a degree on senior bearers of tradition, rather than elected officers<sup>5</sup>.

Interesting also is the fact that when formal office is finally established in communities like Ephesus it is strongly linked to a teaching role which some elders had. And there is a strong argument made that the term *episcopoi* simply referred to those elders (*presbyteroi*) who led by teaching and preaching in a role which by then was formally acknowledged by the laying on of hands and a developing set of criteria of suitability<sup>6</sup>.

### **Some Conclusions and Suggestions regarding Word and Sacrament**

Ordination to service of Word and Sacrament is the current way the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand takes seriously its responsibility to be led in all its life by Christ and so by Word and Sacrament. It does this not because it believes that the practices of ordination and the corresponding regulations and structures are themselves sacramental and divinely established, but because it realises that as a denomination it is an all-too-human institution, and yet its institutional form is secondary to and subordinated to the mission of the triune God transformatively present in the practices of worship. To continually find structures which will serve rather than hinder the dynamic processes of a missional church is the challenge for all of us. The following are some suggestions to guide us:

- a. Service of Word and Sacrament is a special rather than a general ministry. Those charged with this responsibility should serve rather than substitute for the ministries and mission of other members of the body of Christ. As such the Ministry of Word and Sacrament should not be equated with being CEO of an organisation. The two roles are quite different.
- b. An example of broadening the role of ministry relates to pastoral care. We need to understand that 'care' will be part of all forms of ministry in the church and is not the exclusive domain of the servant of Word and Sacrament. In the body we care for one another.
- c. Within this domain of pastoral care we need to beware of any 'tools' of ministry, which are abstracted from Word and Sacrament. This is not to say that we cannot learn from other traditions and sciences. However it is important that our service (ministry) is not that of enabling people to cope/live/survive under the

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Trebilco, *The Earliest Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius*, Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 1. Reihe 166 (Tübingen, 2004) p 465ff.

<sup>5</sup> Trebilco, *The Earliest Christians in Ephesus*, pp 409-490.

<sup>6</sup> Trebilco, *The Earliest Christians in Ephesus*, pp 503-507

- conditions of the old humanity, but that of serving God's work of liberating people for the new humanity that exists in Christ.
- d. Because of the centrality of Word and Sacrament we need to beware of the power-dynamics and rivalries operative in human community in a fallen world. Clericalism is a form of idolatry of the person which can undermine the worshipping life of a congregation. It is a constant danger. Jesus himself was very aware both of religious leaders who made themselves the centre of attention and of the way the crowd itself put such people at the centre (Matt 23:8-10 'Call no man teacher'). If clericalism is corrosive of the life of the church, so too is anti-clericalism, which seeks to do away with the ministry of Word and Sacrament altogether.
  - e. Having acknowledged the centrality of Word and Sacrament in the mission of God we ought not to forget that there are many ministries in the life of the body of Christ. The PCANZ ordains elders for a leadership role alongside the Minister of Word and Sacrament. The church has in the past and does on occasion commission people for specific tasks.

### **The Eldership**

The Reformed understanding of the Church affirms that every Christian is called by God to a life of faith and service and is commissioned to that task through baptism. All Christians are baptised into a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). This is not another priesthood than that of Christ who is alone the one true priest who makes atonement for sin and intercedes on behalf of the world. It is, rather, a humble participation in the priesthood of Christ brought about through grace. To equip the saints for priestly work, some among them have been gifted by Christ to be 'apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (Eph. 4: 11-12). Scripture refers also to elders who 'rule', 'teach' and 'preach' (1 Tim. 5:17) and to those who exercise leadership (1 Cor. 12:28).

Within the Presbyterian form of church government some members of a congregation in who are discerned the gifts of leadership and of pastoral care and spiritual oversight and who are of good character, are elected by the congregation and appointed by the church session or parish council to the office of elder. They are ordained to that office by the minister through prayer. That elders are elected by the congregation indicates that they are representatives of the congregation and exercise their role on behalf of the whole congregation. The representative nature of eldership also indicates that the elders undertake a task that is properly the responsibility of the whole congregation who are called to encourage and nurture one another in love. The office of elder is a customary means, however, of ensuring that the task is duly undertaken.

Elders are ordained to the further task of providing pastoral and spiritual oversight of the congregation and discipline within the Church. While the exercise of discipline by elders is a concept that may be resisted within the context of contemporary culture, it should be remembered that *discipline*, in a Church context, is concerned with the formation of *disciples*, of people whose lives are ordered by the gospel. Nurture, encouragement, pastoral care and even correction, sensitively and prayerfully exercised, and determined always by love, are appropriate means of strengthening faith and forming disciples within the Christian community. The Scottish *Second Book of Discipline* explains that 'As the pastors and doctors should be diligent in teaching and sowing the seed of the Word, so the elders should be careful in seeking the fruit of the same in the people.' The eldership

is conceived, therefore, as an instrument of God's transformative work, nurturing and encouraging the Church's participation in God's new creation.

The governance of the local church by elders is a spiritual calling and task. Whatever may be learned from other human communities about the principles of good governance, the Church is to be ordered, above all, by the truth of the gospel. Elders have a responsibility therefore to attend diligently to the Word of God and, with the assistance of ministers of Word and Sacrament, to seek the guidance of the Spirit in interpreting that Word for the life of the congregation. This is a task requiring the special blessing of God, a fact acknowledged in the prayer of ordination, and a reason for ordination to take place.

The ordination of elders thus signifies and confirms

- a. Their appointment to a corporate ministry of governance, pastoral and spiritual oversight, and discipline within the Body of Christ
- b. That they are instruments of God's transformative work,
- c. The need for God's blessing and the enabling of the Holy Spirit for the execution of their tasks.

From the above it is clear that a complementarity of function exists between eldership and the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Both serve the life of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit; neither should dominate the church at the expense of other ministries and vocations.