

GOD WHO IS RICH IN MERCY



Essays presented to
Dr. D. B. Knox

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Chapter 15

THE GOD-GIVEN MINISTRY BETWEEN SPIRIT AND SITUATION

KLAAS RUNIA

Introduction

It is a well-known fact that David Broughton Knox has what Anglicans technically call a "low" view of the church and its ministry. As to the latter, in his book *Thirty-Nine Articles* he states that the NT shows that in each Christian church there were various ministries, but the NT does not descend to detail with regard to these ministries.¹ In a similar vein he points out that the Church of England has maintained the policy of episcopacy, but its confession does not tie the doctrine of the Church of England to any one form of church polity.² He is also happy to note that the Preface to the Ordinal, although stating that it is the Church of England's intention to continue episcopacy, does not say that it is a polity enjoined by Scripture or that it is the only valid form of Christian ministry, or even that it is the best form.³

It is evident that this view of the ministry is not only "low" but also very ecumenical. Obviously there is room for other valid forms of ministry. At the same time this view also raises the question: how do we find the proper form of the ministry for our day? Apparently there can be more than one such form. But who or what decides which is the proper form? Is this simply left to our human insights or to the demands of the situation? But if this is so, what is left of the NT notion that the ministry is a gift of Christ to his church, a gift which is administered by the Holy Spirit? We believe that it is worthwhile to ponder these questions, and we offer these ponderings to Broughton Knox as a tribute of friendship and of theological respect.

Spirit and Situation

One of the central texts in the NT with regard to the doctrine of the ministry is Eph 4:11. Here the apostle Paul writes: "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers". At first glance these words give the impression that the offices come directly "from above". He, that is, the ascended

Christ, showers his gifts (*domata*, v8) upon the church, and these gifts appear to be for certain people who have a special ministry in the church. Nothing is being said here about any human instrumentality in this giving. It seems to be a direct act of the risen and ascended Lord.

In reality, however, the statement in Eph 4:11 is much more complicated. First of all, we notice that the term "ministry" or "office" is not used at all. Paul only mentions certain *people* who have a particular *function* in the church. Secondly, the *terms* used are not altogether clear. Who are these *apostles*? Are they the inner circle of the Twelve? Or are they the apostles in the wider sense of the term, including Paul himself (cf. the opening greeting of all his letters), James, the Lord's brother (Gal 1:19; 2:9), Barnabas (Acts 14:4, 14), Andronicus and Junias (Rom 16:7)? And who are meant here by the *prophets*? According to the NT every Christian is potentially a prophet. Paul urges the Christians at Corinth to "desire earnestly the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1). The NT itself gives several examples of this actually happening (Acts 19:6; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:4, 5). On the other hand, the NT also knows of a special group of prophets who are set apart for a special ministry of prophecy. These prophets are not office-bearers in the technical sense of the word. Nowhere do we read of their ordination.⁴ Which prophets does the apostle have in mind in Ephesians 4? And who are meant by the *evangelists*? The term occurs three times in the NT (Eph 4:11; Acts 21:8 [Philip]; 2 Tim 4:5 [Timothy]). We do not know exactly what their specific task was.

Finally, Paul speaks in one breath of "*pastors and teachers*" (the article is not repeated before "teachers"). From 1 Cor 12:28 it seems to follow that, just as in the case of the apostles and prophets, teachers were not ordained officers but charismatics who had "the task of explaining the Christian faith to others and of providing a Christian exposition of the Old Testament".⁵ Although they originally may have travelled from congregation to congregation, in the NT writings they are seen as residing in a particular church (cf. Acts 13:1). The same is true of our text, where their task is combined with that of the "pastors", who are spiritual leaders in the local church. But even the term "pastor" in the NT is not yet an official title, for elsewhere the leaders of the local communities are called by other names (*presbuteroi*, 1 Pet 5:1; *episkopoi*, Acts 20:28; etc.).⁶

F. W. Grosheide certainly goes beyond the scope of Eph 4:11, when he says that this text speaks of "a certain organization of the church which was instituted directly by Christ".⁷ The most one can

say is that the ascended Lord himself has taken care that there are spiritual leaders in the church. Or as Calvin puts it: "The government of the church by the preaching of the word is . . . declared to be no human contrivance, but a most sacred ordinance of Christ".⁸ But whether the persons mentioned here are office-bearers in the technical sense of the word cannot be inferred from this text, nor do we read how their appointment took place. I believe that A. T. Hanson is right when he says that "Paul is not recounting the various orders or degrees within the ministry, but is mentioning some of the chief functions of the ministry".⁹

Looking at the NT as a whole we find several indications that the giving of the ministry by Christ takes place within a framework in which two factors play a major role. In the first place we read of the *activity of the Holy Spirit* in the appointment of office-bearers. Especially in Acts there are several such indications. In the sixth chapter we read that the seven, to be selected from and by the congregation itself, must be "men of good repute, full of Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3, 5). In Acts 20 Paul says to the elders of the church at Ephesus: "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians" (v28). In the First Letter to the Corinthians the appointment of apostles, prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, etc., is set within the context of the charismatic gifts to the church. Again the Spirit is prominent, for it is through him that these gifts are distributed. This line of thought is not in conflict with Eph 4:11 where Christ is the giver. The entire NT teaches that the risen and ascended Lord works through the Spirit. It is he who pours out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33). The Spirit in turn guides the church into all truth by taking this truth from Christ and declaring it to the church (John 16:14). The ascended Christ and the Spirit are so closely interrelated that Paul can even write: "The Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17a). This does not mean a simple identification, as is clear from the whole chapter (see in particular vv3, 6, 8, 17b), but Paul stresses their inseparable unity as they act toward and in the congregation. The Lord is now present among his people in the modus of the Spirit. All that he does he does through the Spirit, and all that the Spirit does issues from the ascended Lord.

There is, however, yet another factor. The Spirit does not do his work in a vacuum, but he always acts within a *concrete historical situation* and takes this situation into account. This explains the great variety of ministerial structures in the NT itself. These structures do not have a fixed form, but acting upon and reacting to every new situation the Spirit continually creates new structures. When in the early days the church of Jerusalem is faced with the problem that the

widows of the Hellenists are neglected, the apostles propose to the congregation to pick out seven men in order that they may be appointed to perform the diaconal task. The situation requires a solution and the apostles do not hesitate for one moment to go ahead and appoint men for this particular ministry. Later on we see that the Jewish-Christian congregations adapt themselves to more Jewish patterns of ministry by appointing "elders" in the congregation (cf. Acts 15:4; 21:18). In the Pauline congregations, which often are a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers, a different structure emerges. In the latter congregations the leadership is structured along charismatic lines, as appears from the lists of *charismata* in which functions of leadership are set alongside more specific gifts (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:8-10, 28). Apparently this more charismatic structure suited these congregations in their situation better.

The importance of this interaction between the activity of the Spirit and the demands of the situation becomes particularly apparent when we observe the decisions of the so-called Conference of Jerusalem in Acts 15. Here the church is facing an extremely difficult problem: should it put the Gentile converts under the obligation to adhere to the Law of Moses? This question is all the more pressing, because the church believes, in line with the Jewish people, that this law was given to Israel by God himself. Nevertheless the conference, consisting of the apostles and the elders of the church of Jerusalem, decides to accept a compromise ruling, which releases the Gentile believers from keeping the Law of Moses, requiring from them only to abstain from four specific matters which were particularly repulsive to Jews (v20). This is a momentous decision. The young church, believing that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit an entirely new phase in the history of redemption has begun, looks at the new situation that has arisen by the conversion of Gentiles, and decides that the old rules of the Jewish religion no longer apply to them. What is even more significant in connection with the theme of this article is the fact that in the letter to be sent to the churches the Conference states: "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . ." (v28). The Conference is in no doubt that its decision is Spirit-inspired and it does not hesitate for one moment to claim the guidance of the Spirit for a decision that was clearly evoked by a new situation in the development of the young church.

This apparently is the way the Spirit works. This apparently is the way he guides the church into all truth. Taking his starting point in what has been accomplished by Christ in his death and resurrection, he leads the church upon new ways which heretofore were not only

unknown but also unthinkable. This is also the way he guides the church with regard to the ministry. According to Acts 20 he has made the elders of Ephesus *episkopoi* (guardians, overseers), although they most likely have been appointed by Paul. We believe that in this same way the Spirit through the centuries guides the church in finding new forms and structures of ministry.

In order to elucidate this thesis we shall briefly look at several crucial periods in the life of the church.

The Apostolic Church

It is not necessary here to describe the whole development of the ministry in the NT period. As a matter of fact, this would be a very difficult task, since the picture is far from clear, as appears from many recent studies. There is in particular among German NT scholars quite a debate going on about the origin of the Christian concept of apostleship.¹⁰ Personally I agree with C. Brown when he points out that all four Gospels speak of the Twelve who were called by Jesus himself and who after the resurrection were commissioned by him as witnesses to the resurrection.¹¹ There can be no doubt that they were not only the founding members but also the founding authorities of the young church. Even Paul recognizes them as such (cf. 1 Cor 15:7 and Gal 1:17, 19), even though he claims the same position for himself (eighteen times in his letters!).

Of more importance for our theme, however, is the question how the *other offices* in the church came into existence. At this point in particular the picture is very opaque. This is due partly to the meagreness of our sources (generally we have no more than a very few scattered passages) and partly to the fact that in nearly every instance we do not know for sure which phase in the development is represented in a certain passage and to what extent it applies to the other parts of the primitive church.¹² For all scholars agree that the order in the first Christian communities has varied according to place and time.¹³ From all the NT writings, however, it is clear that other leading persons appeared very early next to the apostles. At the same time there is no indication that this was due to a direct command of Jesus Christ himself, either during his earthly ministry or after the resurrection. Apparently the apostles did this on their own initiative, prompted by the needs of the particular situation.

The first instance in Acts is the appointment of the seven in chap. 6. This is clearly an answer to a practical need. It is also clear that these seven men receive a ministerial task, although it is difficult to circumscribe the exact ramifications of this ministry. There is no

mention of a special revelation of the Spirit preceding the appointment, but within the context of the entire book of Acts, which repeatedly emphasizes the guidance of the young church by the Spirit, we may assume that this decision too has been made by the apostles within the dialectical tension between Spirit and situation.

The same applies to the next instance in Acts. We refer to the striking role of James, the brother of Jesus, in the Jerusalem church. Suddenly he appears to be the leader, when Peter after his liberation from prison and immediately before his "departure to another place", says to the people in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark: "tell this to James and to the brethren" (Acts 12:17). At the Jerusalem Conference in chap. 15 he appears to have the leading role and to belong to the apostles (a fact afterwards also recognized by Paul, cf. Gal 1:17, 19). How did he come to this position? Several reasons have been suggested, such as his meeting with the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:7), his apostolic dignity, the reputation of his character and piety, and the dynastic principle (as the nearest relative of the Messiah he was a personal representative on earth until Christ's return; in other words, it would have been a kind of "caliphate").¹⁴ Whatever the reason may have been, there can be no doubt that the historical situation played a major part in pushing James into a position of leadership in the church.

The role of the situation is still clearer when we look at the appearance of *elders* in the primitive church. There is no indication in the NT of the institution of a separate order of elders. They appear to be present in the church of Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). In 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4 and 21:8 they cooperate with the apostles in taking important decisions for the entire Christian church. Where do they come from? There can be little doubt that their entrance as leaders of the Christian communities stems from the pattern of the synagogue. In NT times each Jewish community had its council of elders whose main task was the general administrative oversight of the community and its representation in relations with the Roman authorities.¹⁵ Apparently the young church at Jerusalem felt the need to have a similar council of elders, in spite of the fact that the apostles, at least in the first period, resided in this church. The reason may well have been that the apostles first of all had a missionary task. From chaps. 15 and 16 it appears that at first it was a common leadership, the apostles always being mentioned first. How the tasks were divided we do not know. Since 11:30 records that the relief money was handed over to the elders by Barnabas and Saul, this may indicate that the task of the elders was primarily administrative.¹⁶ However this may be, the office itself seems to have been copied from the Jewish pattern, for the

simple reason that the young church needed leaders next to the apostles.

It is striking that the term "elders" does not occur in any of the Pauline letters, apart from the Pastoral Epistles. This is the more striking because in Acts 14:23 Luke recounts that on their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in all the churches they had established. Likewise, in 20:17 Luke speaks of the "elders" of the (Pauline) church at Ephesus. L. Coenen has suggested that by the time of the composition of Acts the Pauline churches of Asia Minor had adopted the "presbyterian" system of government.¹⁷ This may well be true, but it is equally possible that Luke simply uses the terms known in his own circles as indication of the offices in the Pauline churches. The term does occur, however, in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim 4:14; 5:17, 19; Tit 1:5). Whether these letters are from Paul or from one of his disciples, in both cases they clearly show that at the time of writing the Pauline churches did have these office-bearers. From I Clement we also know that at the end of the first century there were elders at Corinth.¹⁸

We shall not enter into a long discussion of the relationship between *charisma* and *office* in the Pauline letters and congregations.¹⁹ The letters clearly indicate that from the very beginning there were people who exercised a kind of leadership (cf. 1 Cor 16:15, 16; 1 Thess 5:12),²⁰ but their exact function remains obscure. Personally I believe that we should not unduly spiritualize the development. It was quite natural that these young communities needed leaders for all kinds of tasks.²¹ Moreover, some people evidently had received certain *charismata* that enabled them to perform certain tasks. In the earlier period the emphasis may have been on the function rather than on the office (cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:8).²² H. Ridderbos rightly points out that "it is the nature of certain *charismata* [and of certain functions as well, K.R.] that they have not merely an incidental, but a continual, significance, and therefore of themselves lay claim to continuing and regular recognition (for which reason the *charismata*, too, are not only denoted as powers, etc., but also as persons; cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:8, 11)".²³ The development has most likely been rather rapid, for in Phil 1:1 we already read of "bishops and deacons" and Eph 4:11 mentions "pastors and teachers".

At any rate we should guard against absolutizing the differences between the *charisma-inspired* and the *appointed* ministry. H. Küng has pointed out that from the very start both ministries had several significant common features.²⁴ Both presuppose at least four things: (a) the original witness and commission of the apostles; (b) faith in the gospel and the receiving of baptism; (c) the grace of God in both

the charismatic person and the appointee; (d) the discernment of spirits by the community of believers. The last two elements in particular show that both kinds of offices arise within the dialectical tension between Spirit and situation. It is the Spirit who endows these leaders with his gift(s), but at the same time they are voluntarily received and/or appointed by either the apostles or the congregation itself. Again Acts 20:28 is paradigmatic for both ministries: "the Holy Spirit has made you guardians over the flock". This did not happen apart from but through the appointment and/or reception by men.

In the Pastoral Epistles the picture becomes clearer, although even here there are many unanswered questions.²⁵ We certainly read of elders, bishops and deacons as self-evident aspects of congregational life. From Tit 1:5 it appears that the terms "elder" and "bishop" are still interchangeable. As yet there is no trace of an emerging monarchical episcopate.²⁶ All offices still have a collegiate character. But the offices themselves are firmly established, most likely due to the pressures of heretical teaching. The emphasis on sound doctrine (e.g. 1 Tim 1:3; 4:16; 6:3; Tit 2:7, 10) and the warnings against false teaching (e.g. 1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 4:3-4; Tit 1:10-11; 3:9) point in this direction. Again the situation seems to demand this development and the church accepts it as proof of the guiding hand of the Spirit (cf. 1 Tim 4:1).

It is interesting to note that many Roman Catholic scholars come to similar conclusions. J. L. McKenzie writes:

The impression which the early Church leaves of itself is that it was very tolerant of variation in form and function; there is no clear deliberate effort to reach fixity of structure. The office and the function can be modified to meet existing situations; there are many gifts, but one Spirit. The structure itself is not sacred; the inner life which gives the structure its Christian character is sacred . . . The New Testament shows with great clarity . . . the flexibility by which the Church adapts its structure to changes in the history and the culture in which the Church exists. In this area rigidity would be fatal.²⁷

R. Schnackenburg is more reluctant. He points out that the primitive church as pictured in the NT "did not lack order and that this order was not one which had to be created each time by the Holy Spirit . . ., but was based on a fundamental constitution of the Church determined by God and obligatory from the start". Nevertheless, he too admits that "enough scope was left the Church for giving concrete form to the constitution and sufficient freedom in establishing necessary offices and services as occasion arose".²⁸

The Following Centuries

The development did not stop at the close of the apostolic age. In fact, it continued in a very special direction, losing much of its original flexibility. McKenzie finds this "not surprising", for "it is no more than nature that techniques which were found useful should be adopted permanently".²⁹ Apart from the question whether the word "techniques" is not too mechanical, the question must be asked whether in this way one is not in danger of accepting developments for the simple reason that they "work" in a certain situation, and consequently running the risk of making the situation the all-determinative factor. As a matter of fact I believe that this did happen, if not yet in the post-apostolic period, then certainly in the Middle Ages.

Roughly one can discern three essential phases in the first period.³⁰

1. Very soon after the apostolic age the *episkopoi-presbuteroi* established themselves as the chief and eventually as the sole leaders of the community. We see this in the *Didachē*, where the term "elders" is not used, but *episkopoi* and *diakonoi* — both in the plural — are mentioned (cf. also *I Clement*). The *Didachē* still holds prophets and teachers in high esteem, but also states that, if there are not enough prophets and teachers, the community is to choose bishops and deacons who will take over their functions.³¹

2. In the second phase, which starts in the opening years of the second century and of which Ignatius of Antioch (in Syria) is one of the first witnesses, we notice that the emergence of the *monarchical episcopate*, that is, each church has a single ruler who is called "bishop". Küng points out that with Ignatius we have entered a completely different world compared with the letters of Paul. Take, for instance, what Ignatius writes about the bishop in his letter to Smyrna and compare this with the picture of the congregation of Corinth in Paul's letters. Ignatius writes:

You should all obey the bishop as Jesus Christ obeys the Father, and the presbyterium like the apostles; but honour the deacons as appointed by God. No one must act in anything concerning the church without the bishop. Only the eucharist celebrated by the bishop or by those appointed by him counts as valid. Wherever the bishop appears, his people are there too, just as where Jesus Christ is, so also is the Catholic Church. Without the bishop there is to be no baptism and no celebration of the agape meal; but whatever he approves, is pleasing to God; about all this you can be sure and confident . . . It is good to know God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop, will be honoured by God; anyone who does something without the bishop's knowledge, serves the devil.³²

What caused such a tremendous change? From the letters of Ignatius one gets the impression that the main reason is that the monarchical bishop is a rallying point of unity and the strongest opponent of heresy.³³ This anti-heresy motive undoubtedly played a major role. In the second century the Christian church was shaken by such major heresies as Gnosticism, Marcionitism and Montanism. What would be more natural in such a dangerous situation than to have a single head of the church who acts as the guardian of its tradition and unity and whose authority can be trusted? Naturally, there were other factors as well. The life of the congregations became increasingly more complex, often requiring swift decision, but decision-making by a "committee of equals"³⁴ is quite often cumbersome. Moreover, in a time of persecution by the state and infiltration by heresy, it would be much more workable to have one leader who could fill the place of highest authority, left vacant by the apostles at their death. Finally, smaller churches could undoubtedly not afford to have more than one full-time official.

During this period, however, more happened than just a change of structure. The new structure was increasingly underpinned by a new theology of the ministry. We have encountered it already in the letters of Ignatius, but it did not stop there. From Ignatius to Irenaeus, Cyprian and Hippolytus we see an ever-increasing emphasis on the God-given authority of the bishop and on the apostolic essence of his office. This was greatly strengthened by the growing conviction that the bishop was not only the successor of the NT apostles, but of the OT high priest as well. One can say that here the situation evoked a theological development that could not simply be derived from Scripture and from the Holy Spirit, but had its own momentum, creating a new doctrine of the ministry that was unknown before.

3. In the meantime the third phase had already started: the *episkopoi* became increasingly the leaders of dioceses.³⁵ In its first stages Christianity was largely an urban phenomenon. Gradually it spread to the countryside and in this phase the *episkopos* of the city became the spiritual leader of the whole area around the city. As from the second half of the third century he also began to wear a distinctive dress of office. In the fourth century, after the conversion of Constantine, the bishop in the Christianized Byzantine empire also received *secular* titles and privileges. He became one of the leading persons in society at large. A similar development takes place in the final days of the Western empire³⁶ and continues throughout the following Middle Ages.³⁷ The bishop became a *feudal lord* and his office became increasingly secularized. Instead of pastor he became more and more the ruler and the judge of his people. Even over his

own clergy he ruled as a dictator rather than as a father. T. M. Parker describes the metamorphosis as the *change of episcopacy into prelacy* and honestly admits that a bishop of the fifteenth or early sixteenth century would "appear as strange a person to an Ambrose, an Augustine, or a John Chrysostom, as they themselves would have seemed to the apostles or to the Apostolic Father".³⁹

How secular the office had become appears from a remark attributed to the notorious Manasses of Rheims in the sixteenth century: "What a fine thing it would be to be Archbishop of Rheims if one did not have to sing mass".³⁹ Parker concludes from this that apparently the functions of the bishop in worship still could exercise some mental restraint upon the tendency to utter secularism. I would rather conclude that this very remark shows the utter secularism of this archbishop. Here we are not only far removed from the NT, but the office itself has become unrecognizable. The historical situation has taken over completely and there is hardly any room left for the dynamic action of the Spirit, even though the need for this is formally recognized in the rite of ordination. The historical development is decisive; it is as a storm that carries the ship along, as if there were no man at the helm. When in 1111 Pope Paschal II (according to Parker "an unworldly monk") proposed that the emperor renounce his claim to invest bishops and that the church, for her part, give up all temporalities and the clergy henceforth live merely upon the offerings of the faithful, the reading of this concordat in St Peter's was "received with indignant clamour by the ecclesiastics . . . and the lay magnates present".⁴⁰ Both clergy and laity seem to have lost all consciousness of the inherently charismatic and spiritual nature of the ministry.

The Reformation

It is no wonder that the Reformers were deeply critical of this whole system. This does not mean that they rejected the office of bishop as a matter of principle. In fact, both Luther and Calvin were willing to accept it, if the bishops would be prepared to be real and spiritual shepherds of their flocks. However, exactly this willingness was lacking and nearly all bishops opposed the reformation of the church and of the ministry.

As is well known, Luther at first did not dream of establishing a new church with a new polity. Although he did accept the exegesis of Jerome (*Presbyter idem qui episcopus*) and believed that the NT only knew a plurality of *episkopoi* and *presbuteroi*, he nevertheless did not object to the later development of one bishop ruling over the others. What he did object to was the primacy of the bishop of Rome.

After his excommunication by the pope in June 1520, however, he wrote a letter to the German nobility stating that each village and town should choose a bishop (or *Pfarr*), so that the Word of God could be preached there.⁴¹ This, to Luther, was the principal thing. Compared with the preaching of the Word the question of the legitimacy of the episcopal order was of secondary importance.

But Luther begins increasingly to realize that the bishops are not willing to join the Reformation movement, and so he writes in his tract "On the power of a Christian congregation over its preachers":

We conclude then that a Christian congregation that has the gospel, possesses not only the right and power but also owes it to the salvation of souls according to the baptismal bond it has entered into, to shun, avoid, depose and withdraw from the authority which the present bishops . . . exercise; for it is publicly manifest that they live and govern in opposition to God and his Word.⁴²

This becomes the official line of thought in Lutheranism. In Art. XIV of the "Apology" of the Confession of Augsburg Melancthon writes that the Lutheran churches have a

deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, although they were created by human authority. We know that the Fathers had good and useful reasons for instituting ecclesiastical discipline in the manner described by the ancient canons. But the bishops either force our priests to forsake and condemn the sort of doctrine we have confessed, or else, in their unheard of cruelty, they kill the unfortunate and innocent men. This keeps our priests from acknowledging such bishops. Thus the cruelty of the bishops is the reason for the abolition of canonical government in some places, despite our earnest desire to keep it.⁴³

In Calvin's works we find virtually the same view. He does not object in principle to the episcopal order either, even though he himself prefers a presbyterial order, but just as Luther he severely criticizes the existing system and speaks even of the "hellish perversion" in the hierarchy of "devilish bishops" under the papacy.⁴⁴

In the Church of England another situation prevailed in this very same period. Here the system of episcopacy was maintained because the reformation of the church was undertaken by the bishops themselves, and there was no good reason therefore to proceed without it. Again the "situation" seems to play a very important role. This is also indicated by F. J. Taylor when he writes: "A candid examination of the Ordinal, of sixteenth century practice

and of the writings of Anglican divines leads irresistibly to the conclusion that historical circumstances exercised the greatest influence in the persistence of an episcopal Order."⁴⁵

On the continent the existing situation forced the Reformers to return to the NT itself and to make a fresh start in the new circumstances. Taking his starting point in the priesthood of all believers on the one hand, and in the institution of the office by Christ (cf. Eph 4:8-11) on the other, Luther arrived at the office of the ministry of Word and sacraments. Both lines, the one "from below" and the other "from above", presuppose that the gospel must be preached and the sacraments administered. This view has far-reaching consequences when we compare it with Roman doctrine and practice. For one thing, the bearer of the office is no longer a priest in the traditional sense. For another, he does not have a special status but only the special function of the ministry of Word and sacraments.⁴⁶

Calvin, at least in his *Institutes*⁴⁷, makes a much more direct appeal to Scripture, in particular to such passages as Eph 4:11,12; 1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:7, 8; and 1 Tim 5:17. The ministers and the professors of theology (the "pastors" and "teachers" of Ephesians 4) seem to step directly from the pages of Scripture. The same seems to be true of the office of the elder.⁴⁸ In Book IV,iv,1 Calvin simply writes:

We have stated that Scripture sets before us three kinds of ministers. Similarly, whatever ministers the ancient church had it divided into three orders. For from the order of presbyters (1) part were chosen pastors and teachers; (2) the remaining part were charged with the censure and correction of morals; (3) the care of the poor and the distribution of alms were committed to the deacons.

In actual fact the story is quite different. Calvin did not derive his "elder" directly from Scripture, but first encountered the *seniores* or *censores morum* appointed by the city councils of Geneva, Strasbourg and Basle. Afterwards he came upon the ecclesiastical elder in the congregation of Bucer in Strasbourg. It is possible to follow Calvin's development quite accurately in his various writings. In the first edition of the *Institutes* (1536) the elder is not present. Here he speaks only of ministers and deacons.⁴⁹ The idea of four ministries (sometimes Calvin speaks of three, at other times of four ministries, namely, pastors, elders, deacons and doctors) suddenly appears in the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* of 1541 and receives its theological foundation in the *Institutes* of 1543. From the latter one could get the impression that Calvin himself was the author of this theory. In actual fact, however, he derived both the outline of the theory and its biblical foundation from Martin Bucer.⁵⁰

But even Bucer was not the inventor of this eldership. Rather it was the completion of a development that had started in the Middle Ages and was promoted by the rise of the so-called third estate of the free citizens in the city-states of the late Middle Ages. During the reign of the Carolingians, lay people were introduced into the synods ("Send" or "Sendgerichte") which were charged with the supervision and correction of the morals of the population.⁵¹ These lay people were usually called "seniores" (=elders!).

The Reformers associated themselves with this development in various ways. Zwingli and his successor Bullinger (both in Zurich) left discipline of morals largely to the civil magistrate, who appointed some "seniores" to perform this task.⁵² Oecolampadius (Basle) and Bucer (Strasbourg) both wanted ecclesiastic elders next to these civil "seniores". Bucer in particular was in favour of an all-out presbyterial system and advocated the institution of purely ecclesiastical elders. In two of his catechisms (1534 and 1543) he states that there should be elders in each church and adduces as Scriptural proof the following passages: Rom 12, 1 Cor 12, Acts 15 and 20, 1 Tim 5 and 1 Pet 5.⁵³ But this proof is evidently *a posteriori*. Because the churches need, next to the ministers, men who can supervise the congregation, the institute of "seniores" available from the medieval "Sends", is now turned into a purely ecclesiastical office and the passages, available in Scripture, are now used to give a biblical foundation to this new office.

Exactly the same development can be observed in Calvin's writings. At first supervision and discipline are entirely entrusted to the ministers (cf. the *Articles* of 1537). When in 1541 Calvin returns to Geneva after a three-year "exile" in Strasbourg (Bucer's city!), he prepares a new church order for the church, *Les Ordinances Ecclesiastiques*.⁵⁴ Here, as we saw before, four ministries are mentioned including that of the elders. In the third edition of the *Institutes* (1543) he supplies a biblical foundation. Careful consideration of this foundation shows that Calvin again and again takes exegetical decisions that are not based on the passages themselves but inspired by his desire to find a biblical foundation for the offices as they have been introduced into the Genevan church. We think, for instance, of the distinction between temporal and permanent offices in Eph 4:11 (only the "pastors" and "teachers" are permanent)⁵⁵ and in Rom 12:7, 8 and 1 Cor 12:28 (only government and caring for the poor are permanent).⁵⁶ Undoubtedly Calvin himself was convinced that his view was based on Scripture, but we who have the opportunity to look

at the matter from a historical perspective, must conclude that the elder of Geneva (and of Basle and Strasbourg as well) is the product of a particular historical development and situation rather than of straightforward biblical exegesis. W. E. Dankbaar rightly comments: "As so often happens, theology followed the practical demands of the situation".⁸⁷

It is interesting to note that at times the Reformers themselves were aware of this. In 1553 Bullinger wrote a letter to Calvin in which he states that he and his colleagues at Zurich recognize the *Ordinances Consistoriales* of Geneva as Christian and close to the precepts of Scripture. "To be true, our discipline is not in all points the same as yours. The regulations have been made in accordance with the circumstances of time, the locality and the national character. There is therefore no need to make drastic changes in your regulations."⁸⁸ Bucer had a similar approach. He was not only aware of the complexity and ambiguity of the Scriptural data, but also believed that one had to leave matters open-ended in order to meet the varying circumstances. For the same reason he did not mind adapting the various church orders that he had drafted for various churches, to the actual practice of the country or city concerned.⁸⁹ In the last period of his life (1549-1551), when he was Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge and advisor to Archbishop Cranmer, he was even willing to accept the episcopal order, provided that the bishop is only the *primus inter pares* and the difference between the offices is not a matter of dignity but of ability.⁹⁰

The Lima Report

Since it is not possible here to discuss the whole development of the ministry and its doctrine after the Reformation, we immediately move on to a contemporary source, namely, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. This document was prepared by the Commission on "Faith and Order" of the World Council of Churches and approved by the Assembly of Vancouver (1983). Tracing the historical origin of the ministry the report starts with the apostolate. It does not see the ordained ministry as a result of appointment by the apostles, but states: "as Christ chose and sent the apostles, Christ continues through the Holy Spirit to choose and call persons into the ordained ministry" (11).⁹¹ Here all emphasis is put on appointment "from above".

The Commentary on this section, however, states that the actual forms of the ordained ministry "have evolved in complex historical developments". When later on these developments are briefly described, it is fully granted that the earliest church knew various

organizational patterns in accordance with the varying circumstances (21). It is also granted that the threefold ministry on the local level (the bishop as the leader of the community, surrounded by a college of presbyters and by deacons who assisted in his tasks) is a post-NT development and that the diocesan bishop is a still later development, causing a change in the roles of presbyters and deacons (19). The document ascribes this development simply to the continuing guidance of the church in life, worship and mission by the Holy Spirit. It is no wonder, therefore, that it opts for the historical episcopate as the form of ministry for the church of the future.

The problem with this kind of argumentation is that here historical developments and the guidance by the Spirit are virtually identified. Historical developments apparently are irreversible and therefore obligatory for the church. Basically only one theological argument is used, namely, "a ministry of *episkopé* is necessary to express and safeguard the unity of the body" (23). This argument is used without any proof from Scripture. This is not surprising, for it is doubtful whether it can be proved from Scripture. When, for instance, in Eph 4:4-6 Paul speaks of the sevenfold unity of the church, it is striking that the ministry is lacking. In addition, the Lima Report simply assumes that this *episkopé* must be of a personal nature. This is all the more surprising, because the document itself does emphasize the need for the ordained ministry to be collegial. The local minister should act "within a collegial body" (27). At the regional level there should be "regular representative synodical gatherings" (27). This even seems to point in the direction of the "bishop-in-presbytery". Nevertheless, throughout the whole document the focus of unity is placed on the personal ministry.

Another difficulty in the argumentation of the document is that in appealing to past history it ignores present history. In all societies (apart from totalitarian states) a process of democratization is going on. By his vote, by his access to the press and the other media, by government-organized consultations, by action committees and demonstrations, etc., the ordinary citizen has a (limited) say in the government of his nation. I am sure that this tendency will continue and even increase. The Lima Report, however, seems to move in the opposite direction. Churches without an episcopate (such as Reformed, Congregationalist, Baptist and many Lutheran churches) are urged to recognize "the powerful claim" of the "threefold pattern" (25). But is this really what the Spirit wants us to do today? Does the Spirit in our day not require from us to give that form to the ministry that is most suitable for the circumstances in which we find ourselves?

Are There Any Norms?

I would not be surprised if my emphasis on "the God-given ministry between Spirit and situation" raises some apprehensive questions. Does this view not imply that the form of the ministry does not really matter? Does it not mean that this form is ultimately determined by us in response to the situation and that in this way the situation itself, as interpreted by us, becomes the final norm?

I do not deny that such a conclusion could be drawn from what has been said so far. But I must then immediately add that the foregoing is not the complete picture. Once again we have to return to the NT. For although it may be true that it does not prescribe a particular form of ministry, it does offer us certain *normative elements* that are decisive for every ministry in the church, whatever its exact form may be. Or to say it in the words of Küng: the church must always be able to justify itself, also in respect of the ministry, "in the light of its own origin".⁶² This origin is Jesus Christ and his message. He is "the foundation and the goal".⁶³ The church owes its entire existence to him and it exists wholly for him. Its ministry, as to both content and form, is likewise determined by him as "the foundation and the goal".

This means in the first place that in its essence the church is neither an aristocracy nor a democracy, but a *Christocracy*. Jesus Christ is, as the Belgian Confession puts it in Art. XXXI, "the only universal Bishop and the only Head of the Church".⁶⁴ The church, both as universal church and as local congregation, has a direct relationship to this Bishop and Head. It is so closely and directly related to him that Paul can call the church his "body". Within this primary framework the office-bearer may perform his ministry: he is nothing but the servant of the Head of the body and his ministry is nothing but service.

As is well known, the NT does not have a term for "office". The word that comes nearest to it is at the same time the word that determines its essential character: the word *diakonia*. This word was current neither in Jewish nor in Hellenistic circles. It was chosen by the early church, I believe, because this word fully characterized the ministry of the Lord himself. In the Synoptic Gospels there are six passages which stress the servanthood of Jesus and of his disciples. To be a minister in the church is to be a servant of the Lord and of his people. The apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians: "what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor 4:5). The Greek word translated "servants" is even stronger than *diakonoi*. Paul uses the word *douloi*, slaves.

This servant-character of the ministry does not mean that the minister is without *authority*. His being a servant of the only Bishop

makes him also the representative of this Bishop. "Having been set apart from the other members of the congregation, he now stands over against them . . . He speaks words and performs acts which do not arise from his own initiative. His separate position articulates that salvation does not arise out of our own strength, nor from a Christian community."⁶⁵ As the representative of the Lord the minister has to keep the church authoritatively by the grace and purposes of the Lord.⁶⁶ It is evident that *this* authority is not in any way contrary to the *diakonia*-character of the ministry, for it is not a personal authority but one that has no other purpose than to be of service to the congregation.

Another important normative aspect that has its foundation in the NT itself is the *threefold nature of the ministry*. It is striking that both Protestant and Catholic authors increasingly agree on this. At times the terminology used may be slightly different, but they all concur that the main tasks of the ministry are preaching/teaching, leadership/guidance and service/help.⁶⁷ No church may allow one of these tasks to drop from its ministry.

Quite a different matter, however, is the question of the *specific form* these ministries should take. Here Protestants generally have a different approach from those who stand in the Catholic tradition. R. Schnackenburg, for instance, cannot agree with E. Schweizer's view of church order: "it is God's Spirit which in freedom marks out what is then subsequently recognized by church order; this order is therefore, functional, regulative, instrumental, not constitutive".⁶⁸ Schnackenburg here finds the dividing line between Evangelical and Catholic thought even at the present day. Most Protestants will agree with Schweizer. J. P. Hickinbotham simply states: "the form certainly changed in the first century and might do so again".⁶⁹ G. W. Bromiley believes

that there should always be a readiness to change or modify in response to developing needs or the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Only too often a scheme is allowed to grow out of date and thus to burden the church and its ministry with hampering archaisms . . . It is a spiritual stability which gives it dynamic in relation to externals upon which it does not need to rest. Hence, if it is true to itself, it will always be quick to make the adjustments or even the radical rearrangements which are necessary to the discharge of its threefold ministry.⁷⁰

The God-given ministry between Spirit and situation is not a novelty but in line with the NT itself. It neither means spiritualism without any fixed structures nor adaptation to the situation without any

openness to the promptings of the Spirit. Rather it is the recognition of the Lordship of the Spirit who rules over the church in its particular situation, guiding it over the stormy seas of history and making it again and again ready to face the challenges of the time in which it lives.

Notes

1. D. B. Knox, *Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1967) 39.
2. *ibid.*, 39-40.
3. *ibid.*, 40.
4. M. H. Shepherd Jr, "Christian Ministry", *IDB* 3 (1962) 388.
5. K. Wegenast, "Didaskalos", *NIDNTT* 3 (1978) 768.
6. E. Beyreuther, "Shepherd", *NIDNTT* 3 (1978) 568.
7. F. W. Grosheide, *De brief van Paulus aan de Efeziërs* (Kampen: Kok, 1960) 66-67.
8. Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 277-78.
9. T. Hanson, *The Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM, 1961) 57.
10. Cf. for a brief survey D. Müller, "Apostle", *NIDNTT* 1 (1980) 130-6.
11. *ibid.*, 136.
12. Cf. J. Knox, "The Ministry in the Primitive Church", in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (ed. H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams; New York: Harper, 1956) 1-25.
13. R. Schnackenburg, *The Church in the New Testament* (Freiburg/London: Herder/Burns & Oates, 1965) 22; cf. also pp. 26-35.
14. Shepherd, "Ministry", 387. Cf. also W. A. Beardslee, "James, 5", *IDB* 2:791-4. Beardslee believes that the beginning of James' position in the church was not his human relationship to Jesus but his special relationship by faith to the risen Christ.
15. Cf. Shepherd, "Elder in the NT", *IDB* 2:73-4. Cf. also Knox, "Primitive", 21-2.
16. I. H. Marshall suggests that the seven of the Acts 6 had now become known as elders. Cf. *The Acts of the Apostles* (TNTC; Leicester: IVP, 1980) 204. This looks rather far-fetched, considering the roles of Stephen and Philip after Acts 6.

17. L. Coenen, "Bishop", *NIDNTT* 1 (1980) 199.
18. Knox ("Primitive", 20) also points to Polycarp and the Book of Revelation (which he dates in this period).
19. Cf. U. Brockhaus, *Charisma und Amt* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 1972) and H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 438-46.
20. Hanson, *Pioneer*, 102-3.
21. Knox, "Primitive", 11-13, 19.
22. The use of the participles suggests an activity rather than an office, L. Coenen, "Bishop", 197.
23. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 445.
24. H. Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 420-1.
25. Most remarkable is the fact that there is no hint as to who presides over the eucharistic assembly!
26. This is also admitted by many Roman Catholic scholars, though by no means by all, e.g., Küng finds in the Pastoral Epistles "the beginnings of the development towards a monarchical episcopate", *Church*, 408.
27. J. L. McKenzie, *Authority in the Church* (London: Chapman, 1966) 76-77.
28. Schnackenburg, *Church*, 35.
29. *Authority*, 77.
30. Cf. Küng, *Church*, 409-10.
31. *Did.* 15:1. Cf. *ibid.*, 397.
32. *ibid.*, 411.
33. Cf. W. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1959) 42.
34. *ibid.*, 42. Cf. Knox, "Primitive", 24.
35. Cf. Küng, *Church*, 412.
36. Cf. T. M. Parker, "Feudal Episcopacy", in *The Apostolic Ministry* (ed. K. E. Kirk; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1947) 356-62.
37. *ibid.*, 362-84.
38. *ibid.*, 355.
39. *ibid.*, 385.
40. *ibid.*, 373-74.

41. Cf. A. van Ginkel, *De ouderling* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1975) 48.
42. Quoted from W. Pauck, "The Ministry in the Time of the Continental Reformation", in *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (ed. H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams; New York: Harper, 1956) 113.
43. *The Book of Concord* (ed. T. G. Tappert; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 214. Cf. also on the "eirenikon" of 1545, F. J. Taylor, "The Post-Reformation Reformation Episcopacy in England", in *The Ministry of the Church* (ed. S. Neill; London/Edinburgh: Canterbury, 1947) 76.
44. A. Ganoczy, *Ecclesia Ministrans — Dienende Kirche und Kirchliche Dienst bei Calvin* (Freibourg: Herder, 1968) 332.
45. Taylor, "Episcopacy", 76.
46. For the view of Luther, cf. P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 323-9.
47. Especially *Inst*, IV, iii-iv.
48. *Inst*, IV, xi, 1 and 6. Cf. also Ganoczy, *Ecclesia*, 234-46, 315-24.
49. See the 1536 edition of *Inst* (tr. F. L. Battles; Atlanta: Knox, 1975) 227-236.
50. Cf. F. Wendel, *Calvin. The origins and development of his religious thought* (Fontana Library; London: Collins, 1965) 76; cf. also p. 304.
51. Cf. Ginkel, *Ouderling*, 61-77.
52. *ibid.*, 77-114.
53. *ibid.*, 95 and 106-7.
54. *ibid.*, 115-50.
55. *Inst*, IV, iii, 4 and 5.
56. *Inst*, IV, iii, 8.
57. W. F. Dankbarr, "Over de voorgeschiedenis van het ouderlingenambt, bepaaldelijk in Oost-Friesland" in *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 48 (1967) 180.
58. Cf. Ginkel, *Ouderling*, 75.
59. Cf. *ibid.*, 110.
60. W. van 't Spijker, *De ambten bij Martin Bucer* (Kampen: Kok, 1970) 364.
61. The numbers in the text refer to the sections of the first part of the document dealing with the ministry. The document was

published by the World Council of Churches in 1982 as Faith and Order Paper no. 111.

62. Küng, *Church*, 413.

63. *ibid.*, 414.

64. A. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (London: SCM, 1966) 212.

65. H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 379.

66. *ibid.*, 382.

67. Cf. Küng, *Church*, 184 and 395-401 and G. W. Bromiley, *Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 52-78.

68. Schnackenburg, *Church*, 24.

69. J. P. Hickinbotham, "The Doctrine of the Ministry" in *The Ministry of Church* (ed. S. Neill; London/Edinburgh: Canterbury, 1947) 39.

70. Bromiley, *Ministry*, 85; cf. also 81-5.