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Presiding at the Lord's Supper

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Manuscript written as a contribution to the discussion within the United Reformed Church regarding "the presidency at the Lord's Supper of members other than those ordained."

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The General Assembly of 1979 was asked to review the practice of the United Reformed Church in respect of the presidency at the Lord's Supper of members other than those ordained. Such a review has the possibility of leading us into a discussion of some of the deepest matters of our faith and life. It is an opportunity for the whole Church to consider and to grasp more fully some of the central matters of our common life. I am writing this as a contribution to the discussion.

1. How did the Rule of ordination arise?

It is sometimes asked whether Jesus ever intended to found a Church. His message was about the Kingdom of God and there is very little to be found in the Gospels about the Church. There is room for debate about how Jesus foresaw the future of the Kingdom in relation to the future of the world. One thing, however, is certain. When his message of the Kingdom had been rejected, when even his closest disciples had not understood it, when defeat, shame and death confronted him and it looked as if he had come to the end of the road and that the secret of the Kingdom would die with him, Jesus did something which was a pledge of his faith in the future of his company of friends. He gathered them together for a shared meal – as he had so often done. As he shared with them the bread and the wine, he said to them "This is my body; eat it. This is my blood; drink it", and then added: "Do this, to remember me".

These words and actions were a kind of arrow piercing through the curtain of death to a future beyond. They embody affirmation, command and promise. The affirmation is that those who share this bread and this cup are in very truth partners in his dying. He must go to the cross alone; but he will not remain alone. To Peter he says: "You cannot follow me now, but you will follow afterwards". The cross will not be just a spectacle, a memory, or story. The disciples will become sharers in it – in the broken body and the shed blood. The command is that they are to do this after his death; eat this bread and drink this wine so that he may be present with them and

they with him. And the promise is that he will indeed be present; as they share his death they will share his risen life.

The disciples did not understand, but they obeyed. As they obeyed they began to understand. Jesus made his living presence known to them in the breaking of the bread. They came to understand that, as Paul put it, in sharing the bread and the cup they were sharing in the body and blood of Christ. Sharing in his dying, they shared his risen life.

This, then, is the heart of what Jesus created to pierce through the barrier of his death and to be the place and the manner in which his risen presence would be known. It was the visible centre of the new life in him. It was the place where he was present in their midst. And therefore, as Paul insists, division among the believers at this point is intolerable. He is shocked and scandalized when he hears that the Corinthians are turning the Lord's Supper into a series of private parties. Those who do this, he says, are eating and drinking judgment upon themselves. He sees this perversion of the Supper as something literally deadly. (1 Cor. 11:17-32)

How is this danger to be avoided? How can unity be preserved at this vital point? There are two problems to be solved. First, all the believers in the world cannot meet in one place. There will necessarily be meetings in many places. But it is one body. How is this to be expressed? Second, in each place – if things are to be done in an orderly way – someone must preside, speak the words, take the bread and the cup into his hands and distribute them to the company. Who is to do this?

The answers to these questions were not worked out all at once or all in the same way. But at a very early date the following had become general practice. First, the person who presides should be the accepted leader of the local congregation (called the "bishop"), or someone authorised by him. Second, while the leader ("bishop") is chosen by the local congregation, he is not installed in his office except with the agreement of other local congregations in the neighbourhood. In this way it was made clear that the congregation is the local assembly of the universal fellowship and is not a separate society on its own. In practice the arrangement soon came to be accepted that the leaders ("bishops") of at least three other congregations should join in the action by which the local leader was installed.

The very ancient rule that the person presiding at the Supper should be the bishop or one authorised by him, and that the installation of a bishop should require the consent of at least three other bishops, has its origin in these arrangements.

It is very important to note that these are arrangements for good order. Every member of the local congregation is capable of presiding at the Supper if called upon to do so. But if each one seeks to exercise this capacity by his own will, the very nature of the Supper will be violated. It is a rule of order that the person presiding should be one chosen, called and "ordained" (i.e. ordered) in a manner which expresses and embodies the consent of the whole fellowship, local and universal. "Ordination" is simply an ordering. It is a matter of good order. It is not that the person so ordained has any special power or sanctity above that of the other members. It is a matter of orderly arrangement – the orderly arrangement if mutual love is to be in regulative and continuous operation. But this means that – although it has nothing to do with a special power or capacity – it does express the very heart of the Gospel, because good order is what we have when love rules, and love is what constitutes the Church. The only 'capacity' that the Church has is love – the love of the 'triune God shed abroad among the believers. The good order of the Church should be a reflection of the life of God himself in whom Father Son and Spirit forever live in the orderly relation of mutual love. Perhaps this thought was one of the factors that led to the early idea of a three-fold ministry - the bishop as the father of the family, the presbyters (elders) assisting, and the deacons (servants) bringing the gifts of the congregation and taking them after the service to be shared with the poor.

II Two Sources of Misunderstanding.

In the later centuries of church history this understanding of the "ordering" of presidency at the Supper became corrupted in two ways, and the effects of this corruption are still with us.

- (A) In the earliest times it seems clear that the "bishop" who presided was not a paid full-time professional. He might be supported in part or in whole by the gifts of the people, but he did not belong to a distinct professional class. There was no such thing as the "clergy". This was something which could only develop after the conversion of Constantine when Christianity became part of the imperial establishment. In the course of the long centuries of the "Christendom" period in western European history, the idea of the ordained ministry as a "clergy" – as a body of men constituting a distinct professional class with a special kind of education and status in the community – has become so much part of the accepted order that it is difficult for most people to see that it has nothing to do with the original meaning of ordination.
- (B) Along with this, and not unrelated to it, has been the development of an idea of the priesthood as possessing a special kind of priestly character different from and superior to that which belongs to the whole body of the Church. In this view ordination is the addition of something to that which belongs to the ordinary Christian, a kind of spiritual "plus" beyond what belongs to the whole body. This idea was perhaps strengthened by the practice (dating from the 11th century) of using the words "Receive the Holy Spirit" to be spoken by the bishop to the ordinand as he lays hands on him. This practice suggested that the bishop possessed a special gift of the Spirit which he was able to impart in a direct, almost physical way, to the ordinand. It is now generally recognised by scholars that this was a distortion of the original form of ordination which was a prayer addressed to the Father by the whole Church, spoken through the lips of the bishop, asking that God would equip the ordinand with the gifts needed for his ministry.

III Two Consequences.

The effects of these developments have been obvious and lamentable. What was originally a rule of good order has been converted into a doctrine that only one who has received the priesthood is capable of conducting the central service of the Church, and this capability is restricted to a small number of specially trained and salaried men. From this two results have inevitably followed.

- (A) The celebration of the Lord's Supper is removed from its proper place at the heart of every local congregation and becomes dependent on the presence of someone who may or may not be available and is in any case not necessarily a member of the local congregation. The consequences of this have been most serious in the development of the churches of Asia and Africa. Here tens of thousands of village congregations have grown up and lived for decades with only occasional celebrations of the sacrament because the financial and educational circumstances precluded the development of an adequate "clergy" defined by European standards. And we are not unfamiliar with the same problem, on a less drastic scale, in England now.
- (B) The second consequence has been the loss of the sense that the whole congregation is the royal priesthood in and through its membership in Christ the one High Priest. Priesthood has been identified with the one who presides. In spite of the great Reformation re-assertion of the priesthood of all believers, the effects of this error are still present and active. When - for example - it is suggested that as a matter of principle lay members should be asked to preside from time to time as a demonstration of our belief in the priesthood of all believers, it is obvious that we are still victims of the mediaeval distortion. We are still acting as if the one who presides is the priest. The truth is that it is the whole body which is the priesthood, which does the action of the service and which (ideally) should speak the words of the great thanksgiving prayer together. (Perhaps the ultimate limit of unreformed sacerdotalism is to be observed in some of our congregations where the presiding minister has to say the whole prayer by himself and then even has to say the Amen to his own prayer!)

IV Two Possible Ways.

We have inherited this situation from the past. What is the right way to act now, so that the Lord's Supper may be restored to its proper, normal, central place in the life of every local congregation? The purpose must be to fulfil two requirements: (a) that every congregation has the possibility of celebrating the Lord's Supper regularly as a normal part of its life; and (b) that each celebration should – as far as possible – be recognisable by Christians everywhere, as well as by Christians in that place, as the action of the universal Church of Jesus Christ and not just the action of a private society or a local religious club.

There is obviously a tension between these two requirements. The Basis of Union of 1972 is an attempt to achieve the best balance between them in the existing circumstances. Has the time come to change this? There are two directions in which we might possibly move. (A) We could relax the present rules governing "lay presidency", making it a more normal practice for unordained members to preside. (B) We could accelerate the work to which we are pledged of ensuring that an ordained minister is available for every local congregation. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these solutions?

(A) The first has one advantage: it is cheap. However – as in other matters – the cheap solution has its hidden costs. Let us consider some of them.

(i) To move in this direction would separate us farther from the rest of the Christian family, the vast majority of whom honour and cherish the ancient rule that the president at the Supper should be one who has received a universally accredited authorisation.

(ii) It would create serious strains within our own fellowship. The Basis was not easily agreed upon, and there are many among our members for whom the honouring of this ancient rule is a matter of deep personal conviction.

(iii) It would further entrench in our Church a false and distorted view of ordination. If ordination ceases in practice to have the meaning of authorising a person to preside at the sacrament, it is difficult to know what meaning remains to it. It becomes either an empty and meaningless ritual or else it becomes an act for conferring a status which distinguishes the minister from other members of the Church. This corrupt mediaeval concept of ordination which turns it from a matter of order to a matter of status still deeply affects the minds of Church members. Recent debates in the General Assembly have shown how widespread is the idea that ordination is to be understood as conferring entitlement to a salary. It would be hard to imagine a more profound misunderstanding of what ordination is. If at this time we move still further to sever the connection between ordination and presidency at the Supper we shall to that extent strengthen a corrupt view of the ministry which comes from mediaeval Christendom and not from the New Testament.

(B) The second solution will not be cheap. It will require a great effort by many people to bring us to the place where every congregation, however small, has an ordained minister in its membership. But, after full discussion the General Assembly has approved plans for an Auxiliary Ministry which will have – among other benefits – this effect. It will, in the course of time, provide us with a growing number of men and women who have undergone a then thorough programme of training and who are ready to serve as ordained ministers on a non-salaried basis. I would hope that this would enable us to reverse the trend towards closing down small churches and pursue the opposite policy of strengthening every local congregation ("where two or three are gathered...") to become and to know itself to be a living expression of the universal Church. While we work at the development of such a non-profession ministry alongside our present salaried ministry, we must certainly continue the provisions of the present Basis so as to ensure that no congregation is deprived of the sacraments. But I am sure that the call of God to our Church in this moment is not to take the cheap and easy way, but to continue resolutely the effort to provide a properly equipped and ordained ministry for every local congregation.

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