

Ministry in the Church

Presbyterian & Reformed-Roman Catholic Dialogue

May 14, 1970

The following statement was issued by the Theology Section of the Reformed-Presbyterian and Roman Catholic Consultation at Morristown, New Jersey, May 14, 1970.

1. *Summary of Discussions So Far Held*

For varying periods of time members of our consultation have discussed ways and means by which our ministries could be united and each of us led to a deeper knowledge and love of the other. Our concern in the early meetings was to see how the road lay to full intercommunion. But it soon became clear that this end lay far beyond us, because the traditions of which we are a part have been separated for centuries and because there was not full acceptance amongst us of each other's ministries. At this point, therefore, in our discussion we moved away from churchly questions and asked, instead, particular and practical questions about the church's ministry to the world. But this in turn forced us to inquire why in fact we remain separated from one another when the world's needs are so great, and to see if there may be a way of reconciliation. One inescapable fact of our present situation is the division of the church, a division which is a symbol of, but also a scandal in, an alienated and divided world. We know that we are charged with the responsibility of bringing healing to the broken human family, but we also know that in its own life the church has contradicted and frustrated this purpose.

The common purpose which we have shared together since 1965 has made a genuine dialogue possible between us and brought us to a meeting of minds on many matters of faith and ministry. In talking to one another we each came to recognize in the ministry of the other rich and necessary elements which both of us affirm.

2. *Gospel and Church*

In all that we say about church and ministry we begin with the gospel, the word about what God has done in the cross of Christ and in raising him from the dead. This gospel was given by Christ to his apostles and those who come after them.

The commissioning of the apostles by Jesus Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost mark the beginning of the church's mission in the world. This mission will also have an end at the time of God's choosing when his purposes for the world will be finally and openly achieved. In the meantime the church lives between the ages, a new reality in the world because it is both a community in the world, and therefore bound by the contingencies of history, and a community in the Spirit, deriving its power, hope, and resilience from the Spirit.

The church exists to proclaim the gospel of the crucified and risen Lord to the whole world; to proclaim the Lordship and rule of Christ over all powers; to obey him; and to witness in preaching and the sacraments to the truth that the present age is yielding to the coming rule of God. Despite its weakness the church is a sign that the kingdom of God is becoming a reality in this world. Its common life is called to be a witness to the new life of the kingdom because the church is called to renew human community.

3. *The Ministry of the Whole Church*

From the time of the apostles the ministry of the whole church has been manifold. When the church has been faithful to its purpose the forms of this ministry have often changed according to the needs of the Christian community and the world. When the church has been most effective it has shaped its ministry to respond to needs. The church in the New Testament is primarily the people of God. Thus when we speak of the ministry of the church we must not become preoccupied with the ministry as an end in itself, nor with the church as an end in itself. All that we have to say about church and ministry must be prefaced by what we need to say about the kingdom of God and his purposes in the world. These purposes embrace all the needs of men. Therefore the identification of these needs is a problem to which the church must address itself and seek the guidance of the Spirit.

There is a general ministry or common priesthood of all who are baptized, and this common priesthood provides the context in which we treat the ordained priesthood, or the specific ministry of word and sacraments. For within the Christian community all the faithful are called and empowered by the Holy Spirit to enter into and express the ministry of Christ. There is a whole range of gifts of the Spirit - gifts of service and love, rich in their diversity, not limited to the few, but possessed by men and women, young and old alike. All baptized and believing Christians share in the grace of God's Spirit, the freedom of the gospel, and the basic equality of the priestly people of God. It is our conviction that this doctrine of the common priesthood of the faithful needs to be magnified and lived out more within both our traditions. The Holy Spirit works where he wills and as he wills through all the people of God, calling them to their ministry.

4. *The Representative Ministry*

Within the general ministry of the whole church there are ministers called and ordained to represent Christ to the community and the community before Christ. Traditionally through the proclamation of the word and the celebration of the sacraments this ordained ministry endeavors to unite and order the church in a special way for its total ministry. This calling of some to nourish, heal, and build up the household of faith in the ministry of word and sacraments is one particular gift of the Holy Spirit. Ordination to this ministry is therefore also gift of the Spirit - it is a commissioning of persons by the church and an invocation of the Spirit to empower them for their ministry.

This ordained ministry does not constitute a self-sustaining body, distinguished from the rest of the people by superiority of status or function, but by difference of service. It has

its origin in the election and calling of the risen Christ, who gives some as special ministers to the church for its upbuildings as well as for the sake of the world. For the faithful performance of this ministry the church, in its ordination of ministers, prays with confidence for the bestowal of the corresponding grace of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the ordained ministry exists to serve and lead the community of which it is part, and where it does so by preaching the word and celebrating the sacraments it seeks to do what Christ intends to be done. But this ministry also exists to serve the world of which the Christian community is part, and the Lord himself who gives ministry, church, and world their life, meaning, and purpose.

We recognize that there are differences still to be formulated and discussed. Some of these are the eucharist as sacrifice, the reservation of the sacrament, apostolic succession and ministry, and the meaning of permanence in contemporary ministry. Nevertheless we should not allow these unresolved issues to obscure from us those elements which we hold in common as central to the ministry of word and sacrament. At this point in our discussion these elements are: the Holy Spirit is the source of our ministry and in the ordination liturgy is called upon to bestow this gift; ordination is a designation to the service of the church in the world; the act of ordination has a permanent significance. (In relation to this understanding of permanent significance a particular notion of "indelible character" in the ministry was rejected by the Protestant tradition in general because of the metaphysical implications which it seemed to presuppose. However, in the light of historical research such an understanding of "character" is seen to be but one possible theological interpretation which is not to be equated with the dogmatic position that ordination has permanent significance.)

5. *The Ordination of Women*

The ministry is deeply involved in the historical situation of the church, and has therefore been conditioned at times largely by the relativities of history. In the phrase of Piet Fransen: "The real idea of Christ [in ordination] must necessarily express itself in the context, ambiguous because human, of a given epoch." The history of the role of women in the church has been marked by a constant ambiguity in both the theological concept of women and the practical and juridical depreciation of her ministry. This itself is an expression of and a symptom of the ambiguity of woman's position in the world.

Many women today feel strongly that they wish to share fully in all human responsibilities: they count nothing that is human alien from themselves. It is therefore incumbent upon the churches to respond creatively to this insistent demand. Such a response would involve the opening of areas of ministry as far as possible to women. There is a growing consensus also among Roman Catholic as well as Reformed theologians that there is no insurmountable biblical or dogmatic obstacle to the ordination of women. We therefore conclude from all of this, as well as from the present needs of the people of God and from what insight we have of what the church of the future will require, that ordination of women must come to be part of the church's life. In the context

of human need such ordination may well involve a beneficial redistribution of functions at present expressed in one or another of the forms of ordained ministry.

Unfortunately, although the ordination of women has been accepted in principle by many reformed churches, here too the ambiguity remains, for such women as have been ordained have all too often been given positions of practical and juridical inferiority.

In this growing human crisis the churches can play a healing, interpretive, and creative role, and it is our recommendation that they constitute an ecumenical commission composed of women and men to study the role of women in religion and society. The matters at issue which must be dealt with in further study include not only biblical and dogmatic questions but also those of a psychological, sociological, economic, and political nature.

6. *Shared Eucharist*

The persistent division of Catholic and Reformed ministries over centuries has shown that though we constantly receive the eucharistic sacrament of reconciliation wrought out in the broken body of Christ, yet we have failed to act out his reconciliation in our faith, life, and work. On both sides we confess deep estrangement from one another, and our frequent rationalization of our disunity.

Since we have been incorporated into Christ in baptism, and since that baptism makes us "very members incorporate" in his mystical body, the question of eucharistic sharing is inevitably raised. The eucharist which Christ has given us for repentance, forgiveness, and peace is as well a means of reconciliation and unity.

The religious context in which we live and theologize has changed notably during the period of our discussions in the consultation. Significant historical studies have been conducted in recent years by Roman Catholic scholars concerned with determining the various criteria that indicate a valid Christian ministry. Among Reformed scholars there has arisen a renewed interest in the origins and contemporary meaning of the gospel of grace and the Reformation doctrine of the eucharist. Given the new state of the question, we are compelled in faith to recognize the risen Christ present and at work for the healing of his people in the ministry and eucharist of each of our traditions.

It must be faced, of course, that there is a serious division between Roman Catholic and Reformed theologians over the ecclesial reality in which the Word of God incarnates itself. The division is serious enough to preclude general eucharistic sharing for the present. Nevertheless, both of our churches have moved towards a greater recognition of a common eucharistic faith. Therefore the churches involved should designate specific occasions on which invitations may be offered to celebrate together this greater unity of faith which we have in common and our urgent hope of a greater ecclesial union yet to be achieved. We recommend to the ecclesiastical authorities to whom we are responsible the implementation of such limited eucharistic sharing.