

Forms and Development of Ministry
in the First Century
(B. Ahern, C.P.)

Recent study of Gospel-forms and redaction show that the apostolic community, enlightened by the resurrection, had progressively gained a penetrating insight into Jesus' human awareness of his eschatological mission to create the new Israel promised by God through the prophets. To achieve this purpose he chose twelve men as intimate associates of his life and work. Faced with the prospect of death he committed to these men a necessary future task. He charged the Twelve - and, through them, the future community - to carry on his mission in the midst of the new "progeny" which he, as the Servant of Jahweh, would bring into existence through his death and resurrection (Is 53:10; cf Jn 17; Matt. 10:26-27; 18:18; Lk 22:19 - cf Ex 29:35).

As for the form and structure of their ministry, it is increasingly clear that Jesus gave to the Twelve no other pattern than the example of his own ministry. In lieu of precise directions he promised that the Holy Spirit would be their guide in every new contingency. At Pentecost, therefore, the risen Lord of glory filled the Twelve and the community of believers with his own Spirit, that they might have in themselves and share with others the messianic blessings of the "Day of the Lord" (Acts 2: 14-36; 3: 12-26).

The Twelve immediately began their ministry. They were clearly conscious of a duty "to devote themselves to the conduct of the prayer assemblies and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6: 2-4).

For their part, the first believers looked to the Twelve for light and guidance (Acts 2:42; 4:33; 6:1-6). Before long other ministers became active in ministering to the needs of the community of believers: the "Seven" served the needs of the Greek-speaking Jews (Acts 6:1-6); Barnabas carried on a ministry in Antioch (Acts 11: 18b-26); James and the elders ministered to the Aramaic-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:4,13; Gal 1:19; 2:12). Very little is known of the later activity of the Twelve as a group. The Good News which they proclaimed became the living force of a world-wide movement in which other men carried on the ministry which the Twelve began in Jerusalem.

The complex history of this ministry in an expanding church culminates in the mid-second century when a structured church order, with fixed and consecrated ministries, was widely accepted. The intervening century of church life which led to the stabilisation of ministry as an institution is illumined by the Acts of the Apostles, the epistles of St. Paul, and the post-apostolic writings. Unfortunately, because this literature is fragmentary and occasional, it does not provide sufficient material for an accurate history of the

development of ministry during this period. Silence lies heavy over such significant elements as the actual existence of a fixed ministry in some local churches, the role and function of ministers, the manner in which ministers were chosen and endorsed. In view of these lacunae in our sources, most scholars confine themselves to conjecture and tentative conclusions on the successive phases of ongoing development which eventually led to the structures of ministry as an institution.

There are two facts, however, which every historian must keep in mind if his presumptive conclusions are to bear credibility.

1. The acceptance of ministerial structures in the mid-second century was already partially anticipated in late first-century and early second century writings (the Pastoral Epistles, III John, the Didache, 1 Clement, and Ignatius). The spirit of sure confidence with which these letters refer to ministerial orders is significant, especially in view of the fact that the letters are directed to communities which were intent on safeguarding traditional doctrine and practice. It would seem, therefore, that these churches, previously ruled by St. Paul and St. John, had long been familiar with at least rudimentary forms of ministry which prepared for the development which these writings presume has taken place.

2. All New Testament references to a fixed or free charismatic ministry presume the ecclesial character of this service. Paul himself provides the paradigm for the New Testament concept of ministry. Though profoundly conscious of his personal call and of the unique contribution which he was making to the development of the church's self-consciousness, Paul consistently showed a compelling concern to be one with the Church in Jerusalem, cherishing the doctrine which was taught there (1 Cor 11:23ff.; 15:3ff.) and respectful of the practices in Jerusalem which Paul long regarded as the "mother-church" (1 Thes 2:14; 1 Cor 11:16). Following Paul's lead, authentic Christianity in the first century lived and judged within an ecclesial context, everything had to be in and for the church, the body of Christ. True ministry, therefore, was looked upon as a service to the very life which the Christian community had received from the message of salvation first proclaimed by the Twelve (cf. 1 Cor 12; Rom 12:4-8; Eph 4:11-16; 2:19-22).

These two facts provide anchorage amid the conflicting views on early ministry. The fact is that the New Testament has little to say about ministry as an institution. Some would interpret this silence as an indication that a fixed ministry was such an ordinary part of community life that it did not merit special attention. Others, however, have concluded that this textual reticence indicates a fluid

situation, especially in the Pauline churches of the Diaspora where free charism abounded in church life. This latter suggestion does not seem to accord with fact. Paul's constant awareness of the pre-eminent role of the Jerusalem church gives us reason to think - a priori - that he would also provide some fixed structure of ministry in the churches which he himself founded. Actual fact makes this more than a conjecture. The Pauline documentary is rich with explicit statement and allusion:

1 Thes 5:12-13: - "We beg you, brothers, to acknowledge those who are working so hard among you, and in the Lord's fellowship are your leaders and counsellors. Hold them in the highest possible esteem and affection."

Phil 1:1 - "From Paul ... to all those who live at Philippi, including their bishops and deacons."

Acts 14:23 - "In each of these churches, they appointed elders."

Acts 20:17 - "He did, however, send from Miletus to Ephesus and summon the elders of the congregation; and when they joined him, he spoke as follows ... 'Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has given you charge, as shepherds of the church of the Lord' (v 28)"

Rom 12:7-8 - "The gift of administration, in administration ... If you are a leader, exert yourself to lead."

1 Cor 12:27-28 - "Within our community God has appointed ... those who have power to guide them". cf. 1 Cor 16:15-16; it uses the same phrase (synergounti kai kopionti) which we find in 1 Thes 5:12-13.

It seems unwarranted, therefore, to make light of the evidence we have for some form of fixed ministry even in the Greek-speaking churches founded by Paul. Supporters of a contrary view can only appeal to the Apostle's silence; and arguments from silence in fragmentary and occasional writings carry no independent weight.

At the same time, however, we must face the fact that we know very little about the character of the fixed ministry in the early church. The Jerusalem pattern of ministry was certainly borrowed directly from the organisation of contemporary Judaism. The evidence of Acts is persuasive; the term presbyteroi occurs eighteen times in that book. (The Jerusalem structure also bears close resemblance to the Qumran ministry of the mebaqqer and paqid.) As we have indicated, there is good reason to think that Paul carried this structure into the churches of the diaspora where the names of the ministers take on a Greek coloration: presbyteros, episkopos, and diakonos.

To be more explicit than this is not possible. How the ministers were chosen and appointed, what was their tenure of office and their precise function in the community, what was their role in the prayer-service of "breaking the bread," - questions like these will never receive a satisfactory answer unless new literature from the period is forthcoming.

There are other facts, however, which the apostolic and post-apostolic writings make clear. The function of "guiding" and "administering" was seen as an actualisation of a charism of the Spirit (cf. Cor 12; the Pastoral Epistles on requirements for ministry). To men thus gifted (and designated as "those who stand out in front" - Rom 12:7) - as to others also - the Spirit often gave corresponding gifts of "prophecy", "teaching", "comforting", gifts which were regarded as even more necessary for building up the Christian life of the community. There is good reason to think that these latter gifts endorsed a man for presiding at the Eucharist, even though he did not qualify as an episkopos - presbyteros. Life in the apostolic community, therefore, seems to have accepted a fair degree of fluidity in role and function. Apart from Paul himself, there is no figure in the Pauline documentary who, by reason of his ministerial role, necessarily incorporates all the functions of teacher, prophet, judge, and president of the Eucharist assembly. If, by the mid-second century, the episkopos emerges as the embodiment of the faith of the local community, this may be accounted for by the disappearance of the unique ministry of the first apostles and by the need of the church to safeguard itself against the encroachments of error and malpractice.

The closeness of the first century to the "apostles of the Lord" gave it a way of life and permitted a looseness of

structural organisation which could hardly be normative for the post-apostolic period. Once the apostles passed from the scene of church life, early rudimentary elements of institution developed into a maturely organised ministry, to secure real continuity with the apostles as bearers of the mystery of Christ.