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TRAINED FOR WHAT?

The theology of ministry in the SAFOT report.

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The interim report of the ‘Structure and Funding of Ordination Training’ working party was issued in February of this year. It contains a number of wide proposals which could have a significant impact on the future of ordination training (both pre- and post- ordination). What caught the attention of the media most was the apparent proposal to merge all the colleges and courses into one or two. However, this was not a proposal in the report, it was merely one of several options which the working party wanted feedback on.

It is not the intention here to comment on the detailed proposals of the report. However, it is important to come to terms with the theological underpinning of the report. After all, there is no point in training people if we do not know what we are training them for. The report does its theology in chapter 3.

As with many recent Church of England reports this one begins with a biblical image – the Church as the body of Christ. This image is then developed and various conclusions are drawn out in the process. In this case conclusions are drawn about the role of ordained ministry within the body. So, for example, the report states:

The primary purpose of the ordained ministry is to provide for the ordering of the Church, so that the life of God might be manifest in the Body.

This type of approach to theology is followed in many Church of England reports but is very unsatisfactory. The fact is that it is possible to develop all manner of deductions from an image and there is no guarantee that the deductions will be helpful or healthy. Moreover, the method fails to ask what the Bible itself teaches us about the nature of ministry. Therefore in this report there is only fleeting reference to any bible passages which set out the nature and qualities of Christian leadership.

As a consequence when the report explores the role of ministry it focuses on the celebration of the eucharist and the absolution of sins. Yet where in scripture does it teach that these are the chief characteristic or work of presbyters? So too, the scriptural focus on preaching and teaching as the fundamentals of Christian ministry are tacked on almost as an afterthought in the report. The implication of this for training is serious. If we have the wrong idea about what ministry is then we will not train people for what ministry should be. This is why it has been so important to have clear and largely independent evangelical colleges who could train people properly for biblical ministry.

It is also noticeable that the report follows the now customary misrepresentation of the role of Bishops. It is implied that the primary role of ministry belongs to Bishops ‘and by extension the other orders of ministry’. This is to turn on its head the reality. Whilst the seeds of a three-fold ministry can be witnessed in scripture the actual practice only developed later. It was Bishops who developed out of the presbyterate, as presbyters with a wider sphere of ministry (Bishops are after all themselves presbyters), not presbyters being appointed as delegates of the Bishop.

In view of an earlier article in this edition of *Cross†Way* it is worth mentioning how the report handles the Lambeth Quadrilateral (which was endorsed by the 1888 Lambeth Conference). The report gives the first point of the Quadrilateral as:

The Scriptures, representing the foundation of Church upon the prophets and apostles.

However, the actual text is much more precise:

‘The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation” and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.’

Notice the subtle shift to make Scripture represent the foundation rather than being itself the ultimate standard. The way in which the report also reverses two of the other points and distorts each of them is also unsatisfactory.

Finally, it is important to hear one of the recommendations of the report:

We believe that a theological pursuit of training is that the character of the ordained ministry should be marked by the holiness that Christ gives to his Church.

This is surely right. The Bible sets before us standards for those in leadership, standards to do with their personal lives. Whilst these things should be the goal of all Christians they are actually to be expected of those who are appointed as leaders within the Christian community. It is to be hoped that this at least will be taken seriously and that those who teach error or practice immorality will not be admitted to ministry in the future.