

SUMMARY

Within Baptist churches and the wider Free Church tradition there is considerable controversy concerning the recognition of a distinct 'ordained' ministry. Often a ministry 'set apart' by ordination is considered to be in tension with the general priesthood of all believers. Are not all baptized believers 'a priest'? Why then should there be a special ministry set aside by the ritual of laying on of hands? At the same time, due to the changes in Western society, the role of the ministerial authority itself has become more and more problematic. Several theologians, among whom notably Stanley Hauerwas and Kevin Vanhoozer, therefore speak of a 'ministerial crisis'. This study seeks to engage the Free Church controversy regarding ordained ministry as well as today's broader ministerial crisis, by returning to the roots of congregational ecclesiology, specifically in the writings of the late sixteenth-century author Robert Browne (c. 1550-1633). Hence, the question that drives this study: *How can Robert Browne's Separatist ecclesiology contribute to a constructive theology of ordained ministry for contemporary congregational ecclesiology?* The particular combination of historical theology and systematic theology qualifies this project as a theology of retrieval, a theological method in which a premodern author is appreciated as a fruitful theological conversation partner for today.

The rest of Chapter 1 is dedicated to a further examination, first of the historical and systematic challenges, secondly of the state of research into the ecclesiology of Robert Browne is presented, and thirdly of criteria that enable a fruitful assessment of Browne's contribution for the contemporary church: 1. Historically, congregationalism itself, and Robert Browne in particular, are surrounded by strong associations of democracy, ecclesial autonomy, and anticlericalism that often make ecumenical debate and mutual understanding unnecessarily difficult. Systematically, contemporary ecclesiology is faced with major shifts in Western society (post-Christian, post-Christendom, postmodernity) that have their bearing on church and ministry, and therefore demand evaluation; such as the consumerist ethos of society, the loss of self-evident authority, a rise of secular notions of profession and leadership. 2. The survey summary of Browne-research, shows a remarkable ambivalence; first concerning his ecclesiological position within the sixteenth-century debates; and second, concerning the interpretation of the distribution of ministerial authority within his covenantal approach to the church. 3. To formulate a constructive proposal three criteria are established that represent the congregational concern, based on three widely heard objections against the recognition of a distinct ministry set apart by ordination—*viz.* the problem with a clergy-laity divide, the problem with outward ritualism, and the problem of ministerial exclusivity. Three eminent Free Church theologians, James McClendon, Charles Spurgeon, and Miroslav Volf, are consulted for this purpose. Our analysis of their protest resulted in the following criteria, that henceforth guide this study: *communal priesthood, permanent accountability* and

interdependence. To answer our leading question, this study faces a dual object that subsequently gives this study its twofold structure. In Part 1 a reconsideration of Browne's literature in the context of the ecclesiological debates in Elizabethan England. And, in Part 2, a retrieval of Browne's covenantal ecclesiology within the contemporary situation.

Part 1 presents in Chapter 2 a historical-theological analysis of some major influences at Cambridge University during the English Reformation, that shaped the intellectual atmosphere in which Browne developed his ecclesiological convictions. Browne's own biography is the starting point for discussing these developments. This chapter reveals a close relationship between the young Browne and the events at Cambridge University in the 1570's, particularly the rise of the Presbyterian Puritans under leadership of Thomas Cartwright, and the famous preacher and spiritual counselor Richard Greenham, in whose household seminary Browne participated. Our contextual furthermore shows that the biblical reorientation at Cambridge century, formed a seedbed for a more critical stance toward the state governed Church of England, in favor of a more local-orientated ecclesiology ('turn to the local church'). Especially in the Elizabethan era, Cambridge University became the center of nonconformity and source of a more thoroughgoing reformation, especially inspired by Genevan Presbyterian ecclesiology. The Presbyterian agenda essentially implied an abolishment of the episcopal structure of the Church of England, and was therefore considered subversive to English society. Ringleaders such as Cartwright, and later John Field and Thomas Wilcox, produced the nonconformist climate in which Browne attended the university city and was stimulated to rethink the state of the English church. Though Richard Greenham—for a period of time Browne's mentor—may have been at the more moderate side of Puritanism, he nonetheless implemented the crown jewels of Presbyterian ecclesiology in his parish church in Dry Drayton: a strong preaching ministry supported by, and embedded within, a local congregation, appointed by an interplay of congregational election and elderly ordination. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, these 'hasty Protestants', as the Presbyterian Puritans can be dubbed, always sought to work out their Presbyterian convictions within the limited space of the English church.

In Chapter 3, Browne's literature is analyzed chronologically within the context of Cambridge Puritanism as portrayed in the previous chapter. Except for his eventual break with the Church of England, it shows that Browne's principal arguments were to a large degree consistent with those advocated by the Presbyterian movement. Though Browne obviously stretched the implications, he too argued for the abolition of ministerial hierarchy, a preaching ministry for every parish, ordination by congregational election, local governance by lay eldership, and the cooperative relationship between church and state in a godly society. Browne's Separatist 'twist' to the Presbyterian agenda obviously revealed the uncontrolled elements within Genevan

ecclesiology. In line with the traditional Reformed interpretation of Ephesians 4:11, Browne tried to work out a theology of ordained ministry that sought to keep the middle between the sacerdotal priesthood and anticlerical evaporation, by formulating a theology of ordained ministry in terms of the church's constitutive covenant with God. In this way, ordained ministry emerges as a visible expression of God's covenantal care to his people. By framing ordained ministry within the church covenant, Browne is able to uphold the shared authority and responsibility in church's life and discipline, while also recognizing the distinct distribution of ministerial authority in the form of God's messengers. Obvious associations between congregational ecclesiology and democracy, lay control, and anticlericalism, are shown to be quite exaggerated and even erroneous. Browne's own theological development was the covenantal framing of the Presbyterian 'turn to the local church', which depicts ministerial ordination in terms of Christ's *sending* and congregational *reception*. This 'twofold' understanding of the church covenant exists out of the divine promise and provision of salvation through Jesus Christ and a secondary human act of obedience to share a common life under the Lordship of Christ. 'Reception', additionally, emphasizes that a congregation never creates its own ministers but receives them as a covenantal gift along the lines of Christ's distribution in Ephesians 4:7-11. To Browne, the character of ordained ministry, therefore, is predetermined or 'pre-given' by Christ. Ordination, it follows, signifies a covenantal re-ordering of the covenantal relations: it is through ordination that the congregation 'receives' someone to serve in the capacity of the public ministry of preaching and the administration of the sacraments. Understanding ordination as a 'covenantal event' thus provides a middle way between sacerdotal clericalism and functionalistic professionalism. Taking Ephesians 4:11 as his basis for true ministry, he substitutes the singular officer with the binary ministries of pastor and teacher. They 'govern' his church above all by Word and sacrament, supported by elders who are responsible for practical affairs. Finally, it is discovered that Browne's 'congregationalism' did not exclude the possibility of synodical oversight. He never advocated local autonomy nor propagated independency, but conceded to the higher authority of a gathering of many covenanted churches together.

In Part 2 Robert Browne's covenantal approach to ecclesiology and ordained ministry is brought in conversation with contemporary debate. Chapter 4, therefore, presents an evaluation of the current controversy of ordained ministry by looking at two prominent theologians who have both extensively dealt with the crisis of ministry, namely Stanley Hauerwas and Kevin Vanhoozer. The three criteria, formulated in Chapter 1, are used as 'lenses' to see how the post-Christian situation changed the particular obstacles surrounding ordained ministry: the problem of a distinctive ministry, the suspicion toward authority, and the fear of clericalism. Besides some clear differences pertaining the relationship between Scripture and the church and the

evaluation of sacramental theology, Hauerwas and Vanhoozer jointly depict the post-Christian turn in Western society—including its ‘stripping of the ministry’—as a positive development which enables the church to redefine the ordained ministry in service of the priestly mission of the church. They both refer to Ephesians 4:11 to denote the Christological nature of this distinctive ministry characterized by ordination. Several other theological notions, such as catholicity and *missio Dei*, also come into play here. With regard to the contemporary distrust of institutional authorities, they direct us to a more communitarian appropriation of authority in which ministerial authority is not exercised by obvious superiority but by vulnerable accountability and theological competence. Remarkable in both propositions is also the image of the prophet to explain this vulnerable form of authority. With regard to the ordination-rite and its instant association with clerical sanctity, Hauerwas and Vanhoozer go their separate ways. Hauerwas connects a sacramental view with moral expectations, while Vanhoozer takes a functional approach, which leaves room for ministerial exemplarity including also failure and the need for reconciliation.

Then, in Chapter 5, the results of all previous chapters come together in a constructive proposal of a theology of ordained ministry for contemporary congregational ecclesiology. To this end, a retrieval of Browne’s covenantal theology of ordained ministry is presented, in close consultation with the text of Ephesians 4:11, and the directions offered by Hauerwas and Vanhoozer. This results in three guidelines, mirroring the ecclesiological concern behind our criteria, which together articulate a constructive theology of ordained ministry: ordained ministry as an particular ‘order’ of ministry, vulnerable authority, and a thicker concept of ministry.

First, a call for ‘order’ that recognizes the distinctive role of ordained ministry within the communal priesthood. Ministers are covenantal gifts of the ascended Christ in continuation with God’s care for Israel and the apostolic church, as part of God’s redemptive mission (*missio Dei*). They are visible and tangible expressions of the Christocratic reign, manifesting the church’s catholicity. The order of ordained ministry is not there to substitute the priesthood of the church, but rather to sustain the priestly mission of the whole church. The story of ‘resistance-minister’ Frits the Drifter is a living testimony thereof.

Second, an outline for a vulnerable authority is provided. A kind of authority that embraces accountability to be authoritative. As representative of Christ’s authority, a minister seeks to strengthen the unity of the church by drawing on the very sources that define their common identity in Christ. Ministers thus act in a prophetic fashion; an exercise of authority which is not based on force or spiritual superiority, but on the covenantal allegiance to Christ as Lord. Vulnerable authority necessitates accountable witness by intelligible speech and practical discipleship displaying the message of

Scripture in connection with the catholic tradition. The ministry of Amsterdam's pioneering church planter, Margrietha Reinders, is an example of this guideline.

And *third*, a thicker concept of ministry is described in which the pre-given ordained ministry as Word-ministry is received together with the ministry of the whole church in order to be a priestly people in the world. A thicker concept of ministry recognizes both 'hands of God', Christ and Spirit, and reconciles the gift of ordained ministry with the spiritual gifts (charismata) given to the entire community. It shows that ordained ministry always needs wider circles of collective government and ministries, sensitive to the contextual challenges. Hence, the need for a 'thicker' theology of ministry. The life of 'dissenter' missiologist Lesslie Newbigin testifies the importance of this thicker view of ministry.