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The Ministry and Sacraments

TWO of the marks or tokens of the Church of Christ in this world are that the Word should be purely preached and heard and that the Gospel Sacraments should be administered according to the institution of Christ Himself.

Our conception of the ministry is governed by the fact that it is a ministry of the Church. It is the responsibility of the Church, and not just of a class or caste within the Church, to preach the Word and administer the sacraments. It is just here that Baptists, perhaps more than any other branch of the Christian Church, can rightly claim to be High Churchmen. Rightly understood and rightly practised, their conception of the Church is much loftier than that of the Roman or Anglo-Catholic. It gives a true dignity and a real authority to the Church as a worshipping and serving community.

As we shall see, we as Baptists give an honoured place to the minister and the ministry, but we refuse to believe that the absence of an ordained minister makes the preaching of the Word or the administration of the sacraments invalid or that it in any way makes these acts of less effect as a means of grace.

It is just at this point that we part company with those who maintain the doctrine of apostolic succession. To say that the ministry constitutes or guarantees the "validity" and "continuity" of the Church is, we believe, to reverse the true order; for surely, as J. S. Whale reminds us, it is "Christ in his Church alone who constitutes and guarantees the validity and continuity of the ministry." The Church comes before the ministry, and the Gospel before the Church.

There are occasions when the Church may deem it right and proper to authorize any member to exercise the ministry of Word and Sacraments among them. By so doing it underlines the fact that the minister has no priesthood different in kind from that of his fellow-members, nor can he claim exclusive title to the performance of the functions of his ministry, viz. the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.

But lest we misunderstand the situation altogether, let this principle be emphasized that Baptists from the very beginning have had an exalted conception of the office of the Christian minister and regard it as a true ordinance of Christ in the sense that it is an expression of the will of Christ for His Church.

Now we Baptists have made much of the Reformation Principle of the Priesthood of all Believers, and rightly so. But perhaps we have not always understood what it means and have read into it meanings quite foreign to its nature. Surely this phrase refers to the competency of every individual believer to approach God the Father through the sole mediation of Jesus Christ: it does not mean, as has often been imagined, that all believers have an equal right or calling to perform the same spiritual functions.

It has been recognized among us from the beginning that special gifts and qualities are necessary for the discharge of special duties within the Church, and so on the principle of representative selection certain of our number, who themselves have felt the call of God to this work, are set apart for what we are pleased to call "the ministry of the Word and Sacraments."

We believe that there are some among us who are called "to live by the Gospel" because only in the full-time ministry can their gifts be fully used, and only by such a ministry can the faithful be adequately fed and the Gospel be adequately presented.

But in so doing we reject all appearance of sacerdotalism in which the ministerial function is to be performed by a select class of priests in a closely guarded hierarchical system whose authority derives from their privileged office within the Church. The minister occupies his position of responsibility and trust among his people because of the gift and calling given by God and not because of any official status or special privilege belonging to his "class" or "order." The gift does not grow out of the office, but the office out of the gift. The emphasis falls, as Dr. Wheeler Robinson reminds us, on "the inner, spiritual and intrinsic nature of Christian ministry" and not on its particular form or professed status within the Church. As the Presbyterians would say, the minister is "primus inter pares"—he is "first among equals" whose position among his brethren is based on calling and gift and trust and not on class or caste or order.

Our Baptist forefathers stood foursquare on the doctrine of the Priesthood of all Believers and because of this rejected any idea of the ministry as a class of priests; but they at least saw no contradiction between this doctrine and the doctrine of the Christian ministry. Indeed they seem to have had a far more exalted conception of the ministry than we have today.

Many references could be given, both from General and Particular Baptist sources, to show that for the sake of order within the Church the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments should be the special concern of those men whom the Church had set aside as called and gifted for the work of the ministry.

Others went further than this and stated that the ministry was

not only expedient, for the sake of order within the Church, but was necessary for its true function. Take these words of Hercules Collins, for example, written in 1702: "There are necessary ordinances to be administered in the Church of Christ till the end of the world; therefore ministers are necessary. The Word of reconciliation is committed to them, the administration of Baptism and the Lord's Supper."

Whether they regarded the ministry as an expedient or a necessity, our Baptist forefathers gave it an honoured place among them and guarded it jealously as a gift of Christ to His Church. Is it not the case that we today have lost much of their concern and zeal and that in the years to come we may be in danger of letting this precious gift of the ministry go by default? What do many of our Churches care about the training of the ministry, for example, that our Theological Colleges have to rely very largely upon the benefactions of our forefathers and the payments of our Local Education Authorities to prevent them from closing their doors? What do many of our Churches care about ministerial stipends that very serious inroads are being made into the conception of the ministry as a full-time and life-long calling by ministers having to take on part-time work and ministers' wives having to go out to work to make ends meet? Perhaps they care a great deal. But by their fruits ye shall know them! The Baptist ministry in this land is in greater danger today than it ever has been. We owe it to our children and our children's children to see to it that they at least will not be deprived of this precious gift of Christ to His Church.

So far, then, we have seen that our ministry is the ministry of the Church and that we have seen fit, under the guidance of God, to set aside certain of our number for the adequate fulfilment of the functions of the Church. But where does the authority of the ministry and of the minister lie? The answer surely is: in the call of God's Holy Spirit in his own heart, attested and confirmed by the word of the Church.

"I hold with profound conviction," wrote Dr. Jowett, "that before a man selects the Christian ministry as his vocation, he must have the assurance that the selection has been imperatively constrained by the eternal God." No man dare accept so great an undertaking except at the imperative and irresistible call of God. Writing of his apostleship, Paul could say that it was "not of man neither by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead." This is what the Christian minister also must be able to say of himself. It is his Lord who has given him gifts for the work of the ministry and it is He who has seen fit to call him to this task. The call to and the sanction for his ministry comes from above; it is of God and not of man.

It is true that the Churches ought to seek out and to encourage

gifted men for the work of the ministry and make it possible for them to train for their life's work; but it is God in Christ who must call and it is He alone who can make a man a minister. It is He and He alone who can empower a man to speak in His name.

But it is just here that we Baptists must take seriously that High Churchmanship to which we referred earlier on. There have been times when our independency has run riot and we have forgotten that the ministry is not just a personal service which the individual can take upon himself in his own right, and that the minister is not just a free-lance preacher who can exercise his ministry in a purely individual capacity. He is the leader of a fellowship, the Church, and speaks in the name of that Church. His is a Church ministry which must take its representative function seriously. His sphere of ministry is within the Church to the Church and within the Church to the world; in either case it is within the Church that he has to preach the sovereign Word of God and administer His sacraments.

The minister's authority, it is true, comes from Christ; but it comes to him through the believing community and as a member of the believing community. This is a task which no man, however gifted or talented can lightly take upon himself. A man can be mistaken about his personal sense of call, and if he is wise he will seek the attestation and confirmation of his fellow believers within the Church. "Though it is most true," wrote Hercules Collins again, "that the Holy Ghost makes men overseers of the Church and that gifts and graces are from Christ (which is His internal call), yet he ought to have an external call by the Church to ordain him to office." The minister must know his personal sense of call to be endorsed by the believing fellowship, the Church. This confirmation will be sought from his own home Church, his local Association, the Council of his College or the Ministerial Recognition Committee and, where the work to be undertaken is that of the pastoral office, by the congregation among whom he is to exercise his ministry, that congregation acting in the name of a much wider fellowship of Churches of which for the moment it is the visible expression.

This ministry which we have received as a precious gift of Christ to His Church we must allow none to impoverish or take away from us; we must cherish it and honour it as our fathers did before us and so shall we glorify the name of our Lord.

THE SACRAMENTS

But not only is it a ministry of the Word; it is also a ministry of the sacraments. Our sacramental doctrine, as evangelicals, is based on the conviction of God's sovereign grace in redemption, a grace which is appropriated by faith and mediated supremely in the Word. We refuse to believe that the sacraments are an addendum to the Word about Christ's finished work in the sense that

they add something to that Word which was not there before. They are not a different or alternative vehicle of grace; far less are they a substitute for it. To quote some words of Dr. J. S. Whale: "The Lord's Supper" (and *we* should add 'Baptism') "and the preached Word are alike 'the Monstrance' of the Evangel which is prior to both." The act of preaching is the demonstration of the Gospel in telling word; the act of the sacraments is the demonstration of the Gospel in vivid action. We walk on dangerous ground when we set the sacraments over against the Word as a different or alternative or better means of grace. For this reason we do well, both in our thinking and in our practice, to keep the Word and sacraments as close bound together as possible. Our Baptist practice of the Communion Service following the main service has perhaps tended to bring about an undesirable separation of Word and sacrament. If there must be some separation of the services for convenience's sake, let there be a real sense of continuity lest the sacrament, by not having the preached Word behind it, be left incomplete and perhaps even become for some a delusion and a snare.

We have said that the sacraments, like the Word, are demonstrations of the grace of God. From there we must go on to say that, as such, they are first and foremost God's acts. It is true to say that they are memorials of Christ's death and resurrection and that, as such, they are a means whereby we can not only remember but express our faith. But surely they are much more than that. First and foremost they are God's acts upon us and not our acts upon God. To accept the sacraments as mere symbols (*nuda signa*) of our faith is to impoverish the Church and to blur the revelation of God in Christ. They are no less than acts in which God in Christ is indeed present and active among His people and in which great spiritual realities are portrayed whose benefits may be received by repentance and faith.

Let us look at the bearing of this, first of all, on the Lord's Supper. Here we have a memorial of our Lord's Passion which seals anew the covenant of forgiveness and grace established by Christ crucified. But such a sealing by God's Spirit, by bringing us the news of the grace of God, brings also the experience of it. Every bit as strongly as the Roman Catholics, though in a totally different way, we assert our belief in the "real presence" of our Master at the Table. We may not leave an empty chair in the centre to symbolize his presence as the Moravians do, but we believe He is there all the same, giving Himself to the faithful that their souls may live. Because He is there in our midst this sacrament becomes for us not only a demonstration but a realization of His Gospel of grace and forgiveness in all our hearts.

As with the Lord's Supper, so also with Baptism. We Baptists have always laid great stress, and rightly so, on the confessional

and evangelising value of this sacrament as a declaration and demonstration of the very heart of our Christian Gospel. But to stop short there is to rob it of its greatest value and importance. To describe it, as many have done, as "an outward sign of an inner experience" and as "a symbol in which the individual pledges himself to a newness of life" is to emphasize the manward side of the sacrament to the detriment or even the exclusion of its Godward side. Must we not say that, above all else, this sacrament is God's act which He invites you and me to experience. It is not just a symbol, it is a sacrament; it is not just a declaration of faith, it is an experience of grace through the Spirit. The evidence of the New Testament is not always clear when we try to find the exact relation between Baptism and the gift of the Spirit, but the relation is there. It is an experience in which the Holy Spirit, who was given to us at our conversion, deepens still further the experience of God's grace.

But we hasten to add that the sacraments are spiritual experiences which are ethically conditioned, i.e. their benefits are received by the response of repentance and faith.

We stoutly deny the claim made by certain branches of the Christian Church that the sacraments can be effective *ex opere operata*—by the mere performance of the act, provided that the act is suitably and correctly performed, without any necessary reference to the faith of the participant. Neither can we accept the view that the benefit of the sacraments must be mediated through a particular sacramental system or a peculiarly ordained priesthood. To us such a practice smacks of magic rather than of religion, of paganism rather than of Christianity. As Baptists we believe that the sacraments, like the sermon, are efficacious to the believing soul and that through them the grace of God is appropriated by faith.

This goes for Baptism as well as for the Lord's Supper. We part company with those who distinguish between conversion and regeneration and who see Baptism as the means whereby this latter is brought about. The doctrine of baptismal regeneration is an unethical act and is to us anathema. We part company too with those who would substitute the faith of others for the faith of an innocent babe, for this also, we believe, is strictly an unethical act in our understanding of it. Baptists may be inconsistent about many things, but in this at least they are not. To both sacraments alike they apply the principle of ethical sacramentalism and maintain that the grace of God comes by faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

We have already referred to the fact that Baptists, whether they like the expression or not, are High Churchmen in the truest sense of that term, because they believe that the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are acts of the Church. On this ground Baptists have argued strongly against any

priestly prerogatives in this connection; but the positive side of their argument has not always been equally strong. Indeed it is doubtful whether they have given as much thought as they might have done to the sacraments as Church ordinances and have tended, in the case of the Lord's Supper, to sectionalise this sacrament, and in the case of Baptism, to individualise it. Let us be quite clear about this; by the very nature of the case, there can be no such things as "private sacraments"; and that applies to Baptism as well as to the Lord's Supper.

In recent days the practice seems to have arisen of sectional Communion Services—for Sunday-school teachers, for deacons, for young people, for Summer Schools, and so on. Such a practice may have certain practical advantages. But such tendencies are to be deprecated, lest the Church of God be divided and lest this sacrament becomes something less than it was meant to be—a token of communion, of fellowship, of unity, of oneness in Christ. This sacrament is a sacrament of the family of the Church in which no section of the Church and no individual in the Church has rights or claims greater than another.

As with the Lord's Supper, so also with Baptism. Strangely enough it is just here that we have shown the greatest measure of inconsistency. There have been instances of people being baptized who had no intention of identifying themselves with the local fellowship of the Church, either there or elsewhere. It is the common practice, moreover, for our Churches to be strict over the matter of membership, appointing visitors for the purpose, but some of them regard Baptism in such a light that they are prepared to give the minister a perfectly free hand in the matter of whom he baptizes, as if membership were a matter for the Church and Baptism a matter for the minister. We need to remind ourselves again that both sacraments are sacraments of the Church and are not the property of a priestly caste or of any particular section of the Church or of any particular individual within the Church, however honoured and esteemed that individual may be.

The Church and the Ministry, the Word and the Sacraments; we do well to remember that behind them all there stands the eternal Gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. At our own grave peril we exalt any of these means of grace and give it the foremost place in our Christian devotion. The Gospel itself is primary and all these are the vehicles of the Good News of salvation. Out of the Gospel they came; back to the Gospel they point; into the experience of the Gospel they lead when with repentance and faith we yield ourselves again to the matchless grace of God.

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