
A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE

CHURCHMAN

JUNE, 1899.

ART. I.—A PLEA FOR PARSONS.

A SUNDAY AFTERNOON TALK TO MEN.

"PARSON," everyone knows, is only a corruption of "person." The people prefer broad, open syllables to more dainty and mincing sounds—hence, in homely English, "learning" becomes "larning"; "Derby," "Darby"; and "Hertford," "Harford"; and, by the same rule, in mock-rustic lingo, "University," "Varsity"; and "eternal," "'tarnal."

But, however pronounced, how came "person" to mean "clergyman"?

Through abbreviating a legal expression, we know what is meant, in connection with a house, by "the person of the house"—not necessarily the owner, but the chief occupant, the responsible inmate who presides over it, and attends to any business outsiders may have with its tenants. Exactly in the same sense the parish clergyman was in law "the person of the church"—he was "the man in occupation"; and if a particular church was in question, by the "parson" of it was understood the responsible priest who had been inducted into the charge of it, with all the rights and duties which that involved. In days not long gone by the term had no flavour of humour or familiarity; and to a Devon or Somerset countryman "passon" is still the ordinary name for a cleric in charge of a cure, the term "clergyman" or "incumbent" sounding too pedantic for him altogether.

Losing by degrees, however, its strict legal sense, the word passed out into a wider use, and came to be employed for any professed minister of the Christian religion, and we hear of "hedge parsons," "methody parsons," and, in the colonies, "bush parsons"; while, along with this departure from legal

accuracy, there seems to have come upon the word, I know not how, a new complexion, quite different from that associated with the idea of privilege and possession which originally belonged to it. Somehow a touch of humour attaches nowadays to the term "parson." You smile as you use it, not in ridicule, but as one who is employing a homely, colloquial term for an office which has other titles, more proper, no doubt, but too stiff and formal to suit offhand social converse.

It is well to remember that the term which gives a title to my address had its source in, and bears witness to, no disregard or mistrust whatever of the clergy, rather the reverse; while in strictness it can only apply to men duly recognised and installed as officers of a fully-accredited Christian system. I will not here discuss what the credentials of the true Christian minister are; I only wish it understood that, whatever they may be, in speaking of "parsons" I mean legitimate ministers of Christ alone.

Now, for these I offer a brief plea this afternoon. Never mind why. I think that in these days there are good reasons, but I do not propose to handle the subject polemically. I shall just make, and briefly support, a few assertions about Christian ministers and their claim to consideration from their fellow-men, some of which may not have occurred to all who hear me.

1. First, then, I assert that *ministers of the Gospel, as an institution, were established by Jesus Christ, as the agency He Himself approved for the perpetuation and propagation of His religion*, and, as such, may claim consideration for His sake and in His name.

There is no time to argue this out; but is there any need? Christ indisputably left *something* behind Him as the nucleus for what we call His Church to crystallize round; but what? Not a single line in writing; and the New Testament was not put together for fifty years after His death, nor recognised, as we have it, for three hundred. What *did* He leave, then? Twelve "Apostles," telling them to spread His Gospel and teach His followers, baptizing them, and celebrating a Supper with them, in "remembrance of Him." No one, so far as I know, disputes this.

But when the Apostles died, how was this work to go on?

Why, they had taken care to appoint others to take their place, and transmit the heritage of the promise Christ had made when He first appointed them—"I am with you to the end of the world"; for otherwise must not that promise have become null and void? There is not a trace of a doubt in all the records of the first Christian ages that this was what happened; we are expressly told, indeed, that it did happen

in the Acts and Apostolic Epistles. And when, since those days, did the succession of the Christian ministry cease? Never!

There must, then, be a legitimate Christian ministry somewhere; and that legitimate Christian ministry, as such, must have this presumptive claim to the consideration of men, that it represents and embodies, so far, the will and purpose of Jesus Christ Himself. I shall not dwell, however, on the Divine origin and authority of the Christian ministry for an obvious reason. The more fully it is admitted, the less interest or appropriateness will attach to a *plea* for ministers. Why plead when the cause is recognised as won already? Having laid it down, therefore, I will leave it out of view. For unless certain other things were true of the clergy, their Divine commission would not be admitted by mankind in general, while the statement of these other things in their favour will confirm the convictions of those who do admit it.

2. Secondly, therefore, I assert that *in times of danger and of persecution for the faith, Christian ministers have played a heroic part in suffering for conscience' sake.* No doubt they were bound to; but my point is that they *did.* Putting the Apostles aside, beyond all dispute it was the clergy that for nearly three centuries led the way to the cross, the stake, or the lions. Shoals of Christian priests perished in the imperial persecutions; and of bishops, Ignatius, Polycarp, Cyprian, and Bothinus are only samples of which we happen to have details of the magnificent intrepidity with which the "parsons" of those days died for Christ. Dean Stanley thus describes the three hundred and eighteen who met at the Council of Nicea—all parsons, remember: "They came like a regiment out of some frightful battle, decimated and mutilated by the torture and hardship they had undergone. Many still bore marks of their sufferings—wounds inflicted by instruments of torture, the loss of a right eye, or the searing of the sinews of the leg to prevent their escape from the mines. They were an army of confessors and martyrs."

It is not possible, I think, to sneer at a company such as that! Self-sacrifice in any cause is an argument to which detraction itself can find no answer.

But there have been persecutions since Decius and Diocletian! Recall the awful religious massacres and executions of the sixteenth century. Who bore the brunt of these? I know who did *not* in England. It was not the nobility and gentry who suffered for conscientious adherence to Reformation principles! No; those whom Mary I. roasted alive because they questioned transubstantiation belonged to two classes of society almost exclusively—parsons and working folk.

It nowise affects the argument that the advocates of the Reformed faith persecuted in return. It was emphatically denied by Queen Elizabeth's Premier that any Romanist had ever been put to death for his religion; it was for proved treason only that they suffered. I fear this cannot be substantiated in *every* case of Protestant severities in that time of turmoil and of imperfect comprehension on either side of the true principles of liberty; but it strengthens rather than impairs my position to recall with what fortitude, when their own time came round, the Roman clergy also suffered for their principles. Under the Plantagenets, under the Tudors, and under the Stuarts alike, thousands of clergymen in England, Ireland, and Scotland accepted deprivation, beggary, imprisonment, and even worse, rather than betray their faith and convictions of duty. Can these things be denied? I fearlessly assert they cannot, and submit that they furnish some justification for a plea for parsons, and I have not made half what could be made of this argument.

Martyrdoms rarely occur in our days; but when they do, they are generally of parsons—missionary bishops, missionary clergy—dying of disease contracted in their duty, or of violence offered them in discharging it—a Patteson, a Mackenzie, a Hannington, a Smythies, a Hill, a Stuart, and the five Bishops of Sierra Leone.

3. My third assertion is that *Christian ministers have played a noble part in originating and fostering the social and political amelioration of the times in which their lot has been cast.* Most assuredly this was true of the early centuries of Christendom, when, beyond question, the influence of the clergy was very great; and the reforms introduced into the social life of the Christianized Roman Empire were effected entirely at their instigation. The witness of the pagan Emperor Julian, and the anti-Christian historian Gibbon, on these points will hardly be challenged. Says Julian: "Impiety" (he means Christianity) "is greatly promoted by its philanthropic work; its care for the dead; its reverence for human life. It is a shame that these profane Christians are ready to provide for our poor as well as their own, while the former, as far as *our* help is concerned, are left to starve." And Gibbon remarks on Julian's fruitless imitations of Christian social institutions: "If these reformations had been realized, the imperfect copy would have been less beneficial to paganism than honourable to Christianity." In every social and political reform of that day the Christians took the lead, and the clergy led the Christians, whether it was providing in plague time for the sick, who were commonly deserted in panic by their neighbours, or introducing laws

mitigating slavery, repressing suicide and infanticide, and abrogating cruel punishments and barbarous amusements. It was a parson, Telemachus, who secured, at the sacrifice of his life in the arena, the abolition of gladiatorial shows; it was another, Lactantius, who elicited from the Emperor provision for all children whose parents, through poverty, could not support them. I have not time to illustrate further, but would remind you that the basis of the Teutonic civilization was the Christianized institutions of Rome, adopted by the Teutonic hordes which took its place. In short, the best customs of Christian civilization to-day were the work, inherited by us, of the Christian clergy of the later Roman Empire. Here is a glimpse of the severe standard of moral and social purity set by the clergy of those days. A bishop's pastoral is preserved, noticing with severe condemnation the act of certain clergy of Ravenna in—doing what enormity? Accepting large interest for their investments! And here is a contemporary description of a presbyter of Gaul, apparently not a particularly distinguished man, which, in days when the laity were chiefly engaged in killing or getting killed, implies something of a "lead" in educational, social, and æsthetic matters, as well as in religion: "Dialectician, poet, geometrician, musician, critic, he solaced the desolate with sympathy, the captive with ransom, the hungry with food, the naked with clothing." The right of asylum, the "truce of God," the humanizing institutions of chivalry—it was the Christian clergy with whom all these, in effect, originated. In the settlement of the European bush by the Sclavonic and Teutonic tribes, the clearing of the jungle and turning of wilderness into fruitful fields was mainly done under the direction of missionary monks and clergy. In the South of England it was Bishop Wilfrid that taught the starving country-folk to make boats and nets and pottery. It is sometimes sneeringly remarked that "those old monks knew how to choose the snuggest and fattest spots to make their homes in." The facts are that the monastic missions were planted down in the most forsaken and forbidding wilds, and these were turned to the loveliness so admired in a later time solely through the civilizing guidance and unwearying toil of the ecclesiastics themselves. Among other things, the clergy were ever the friends, often the *only* friends, of the *slave*. It is a minute, but unmistakable, testimony to this fact that, in the law of Saxon England, emancipation was consummated by the benediction of a priest, and the enrolment of the freed man's name made on the Church copy of the Gospels. I shall have occasion again to refer to social matters before closing. But I have spoken of political services rendered in the interests of

the people by the clergy. In dark times of violence and despotism the authority of the Church alone could cope with that of kings and nobles. Have you ever read how Bishop Flavianus delivered Antioch from the cruel massacre to which it was devoted by the Emperor, and how Bishop Ambrose chastised the great Theodosius for his inhumanity at Thessalonica? Though I cannot be supposed to defend the autocracy of popes, which crept in amid the neglect of Scripture and the decay of spiritual religion and darkened the whole life of Europe for centuries, it must be admitted that some of the popes were noble specimens of parsons, withstanding and breaking the cruel will of unscrupulous princes, and witnessing, in the midst of selfishness and fraud and violence, for the supremacy of God and righteousness and charity.

Take England. It ought never to be forgotten that the horrid penal laws about religion—for instance, the dreadful statute "De hæretico comburendo"—were *not* the work of the clergy, but of lay Parliaments. And to whom do we owe Magna Charta? To a parson, Archbishop Langton. To whom do we owe Parliaments? Largely to a parson, Bishop Greathead of Lincoln, the friend and inspirer of Simon de Montfort. To whom do we owe the repudiation of Rome's claim on England for yearly tribute promised by the perjured John? To a parson, John de Wyclif, chief adviser of Edward III., and the "Good Parliament." Who curbed, at the peril of their lives, the illegalities of James II., when he tried to set aside by his tyrannical will the acts of the people's Legislature? It was seven English bishops; and it is not too much to say that the introduction, under William III., of that system of complete religious toleration which has since prevailed in the British Empire to this day was largely due to the liberal and comprehensive spirit of the English Episcopate of the time.

In the turbid controversies of local politics, and in class conflicts, it were unwise in the clergy to take a partisan's share: they belong exclusively to no class, being called to mix with and minister to all alike; but I know no reason for imputing to them in our days any motive for the political votes they may give, except an honest desire in accordance with their deliberate convictions to promote the true welfare of their country.

4. I hasten to another assertion. *Parsons have taken the lion's share in advancing the literary and educational life of Christendom, up to the present hour.* For some ages of our era the writings of ecclesiastics are almost our only monuments of the past. It is an exceedingly probable

conjecture that, in the library of the British Museum, the literature of our era would be found to consist *in largest proportion* of the productions of ministers of religion. "Much of it," someone may interject, "unreadably dull"; and I think it very likely; but at least the parson's pen has never —with the very rarest exceptions—been at the command of vice or foulness. It would be impossible to go into names and details. I am making *assertions* in this article, true ones, I am certain, but which you should test afterwards by the most rigid comparison with facts; and I assert that a very large proportion indeed—far larger than in any other special section of society—of philosophers, scientists, astronomers, musicians, historians, scholars, architects, sculptors, artists, and men of light and letters in our era, as a whole, have been ministers of religion. I can only think of three departments of human activity in which they have yielded the palm altogether to the laity; the first is trade, the second is fighting, and the third is sport. The great universities and schools of Europe for ages were all founded by, or at the instigation of, and taught and managed by, the clergy. As Lord Macaulay says, "the literary treasures of the classic past were floated down to later times over the deluge of medieval barbarism in an ark, and that ark was the Christian Church and its priesthood."

My space is almost exhausted, and I can only make one fifth and final assertion. Before doing so, I wish to introduce a frank and very important admission into my plea. There have been many, very many, bad parsons. Too often the clergy have, like Aaron at Sinai's foot, caught the infection of a nation's moral plague instead of staying it. If anyone says there have been hypocritical clergy, sensual clergy, arrogant clergy, cruel clergy, ignorant clergy, degraded clergy, I say "Yes, indeed, indeed!" God's treasure is carried "in earthen vessels," to use the striking image of St. Paul. Judas, one of Christ's chosen apostles, was, I suppose, the worst man ever born, though I have always thought that Pope Alexander VI. —Roderick Borgia—must have been a near second. And a bad minister of Christ can be worse than a bad layman, on the principle that the corruption of the best is worst, and more obstacles to vileness must have been broken through; just as a woman that can soar nearest to an angel can become, when bad, the likest to a devil. Still, for all these admissions, my previous assertions remain true, and if they are true, my plea has been so far made out. If I say it is summer, and it is questioned, if I can point to a dozen harvest-fields, my assertion is established, and to point to two dozen sterile, unproductive paddocks would prove nothing

to the contrary! It is the normal characteristics and influence of the clergy that are in question.

5. My last assertion is that, *on the whole, the ministers of Christ to-day constitute an invaluable body of standing witnesses in human society for disinterestedness, purity, and charity in this present life, as well as for the surpassing importance of the life to come.*

Disinterestedness.—Assuredly men cannot become parsons nowadays from hope of worldly gain! My hearers cannot but know that there are multitudes of men of high ability in the service of the Church, living—and destined to the end to live—uncomplainingly on the slenderest of incomes, and burdened with incessant calls, who, had they gone into a secular profession or trade, would have long ago made fortunes. But you do not know what the bishop of a large diocese for twenty years knows of the secret privations, toils, and difficulties with which many an educated and honourable priest of the Church of God has to contend, particularly in these days. Oh, my heart bleeds at times for subordinates of my own—far better men, may be, than I am in religious attainment—year after year travelling on sacred errands fifty miles a Sunday, one hundred and fifty miles a week, over the same monotonous track, in burning heat at one time, through dust and mire at others, knowing full well that the harder it is for themselves to reach the scene of duty, the fewer will welcome them on arrival! I confess the old Adam of indignation will burst out in myself sometimes, when I hear of the necessary pittance of men like this cut down, because one parishioner has lost on a horse at the races, and has halved his subscription, and another given so much to the Roman Catholic bazaar, that he must not be called upon for his this time! The due support of ministers by the people is not of man's exaction, but of God's ordinance. "The Lord *hath ordained* that they that preach the Gospel shall live of the Gospel." And it is in connection with the payment of ministers that St. Paul lays down the solemn *dictum:* "Be not deceived: God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap." Oh that men of private means would give themselves, and give their sons, more frequently to the ministry of God's Word, and in this way help to meet the financial straitness which is strangling and paralyzing the Church's ministrations in some places in our age and Empire!

I will say no more about the disinterestedness of parsons; my own clergy, I know, would wish I had not said so much.

Purity—can I claim *that* for parsons? Well, I am officially a censor of their faults, and I am bold to say that scandals among the clergy are, considering their numbers, of very rare

occurrence in the Australian colonies, and the same is true of the twenty-three thousand clergy (or more) of England. I have lived over twenty years in Ballarat, and its seven Anglican churches have all changed their clergy again and again since I have been there; but I am bold to say that, while many of them have elicited the warmest love and confidence of their people, there has been no single ministerial scandal all that time. I do not say that some younger clergy have not done mistaken and even wrong things ("we all make mistakes, even the youngest of us"), but the "power of the keys"—the discipline of the Church—has been exercised promptly and strictly for their correction. Say frankly, is there any other profession, or business, or class of men of which anything like that could be said? And, remember, a parson's peccadilloes even are trumpeted aloud directly, and no sort of mercy is shown him when he disgraces himself. Quite right—quite right! Blinder to the clergy's faults I would have none to be; kinder to the virtues some, I think, might with advantage be. There is one thing over and over again repeated against ministers of religion till many suppose it *must* be true, and that is, that they quarrel over denominational differences. We speak as we find; my evidence may be worth something, and I make myself responsible for the assertion that denominational "rancour," as it is called, between ministers has been absolutely unknown in Ballarat for the last twenty years at least, and I believe Ballarat a fair sample of such places. In their kindliness and friendliness to all, in their personal habits, and in their home life, I am bold to point to the clergy as, on the whole, an elevating example to all classes of society.

Once more, *charity*. Is there any kind of wise and well-considered enterprise undertaken for the benefit of the suffering, the sick, the poor, the intemperate, the lost, in which the ministers of Christ are not either chief movers, or prominent helpers, and, according to their means, generous contributors?

And pray remember that in the things I have been enumerating I have left entirely out of view the one exalted purpose to which the parson's life is given and his energies devoted—the winning, saving, instructing, encouraging, warning, stimulating, and consoling the souls of men. "We have need of him yet," cries Carlyle of the parson. "No man is worthier of his salt than he! Surely to save the souls of men is a loftier function than to shoot the partridges of men!" May we not venture to add, "than to provide for the earthly wants of men, to feed, or clothe, or cure, or kill in battle the bodies of men, to satisfy the fancies and amuse the leisure hours of men?"

I have only a few words more. I know what parsons really are better than most men, having much more copious opportunities of judging of them than most of their amateur critics. They are human, and feel disparagement no less keenly than other people, but seldom feel called upon to defend themselves. There is one thing, however, that is sometimes said of them in these days, so cruelly untrue and so injurious to their access to the souls of men, that they feel it acutely, and I venture to voice their repudiation of it: it is that they are out of sympathy with the temporal sufferings and legitimate aspirations of the masses of the people. I know that to be as false as any lie that was floated on its locust wings up from the pit of the abyss. The clergy profoundly feel, and long to aid in solving rightly, the complicated social problems of the time; and it is an intelligent sense of duty, not any deficiency of sympathy with their fellows, that prevents their throwing themselves and the influence they are entrusted with into the arms of every new nostrum-monger of the day. I must ask you to believe this assertion; its verification will come whenever the appeal shall come for support to some wise, broad reform of our present social system, with real promise in it of true benefit to the poor and oppressed.

My hearers, if you want the clergy to do their work better (and none know more fully than themselves how infinitely they come short of the Divine ideal set before them), don't think to do it by running them down. Never allow yourselves, or your children, or your comrades to indulge in disrespectful talk about men whose function is so momentous, so difficult, so sacred, so linked with the eternal issues of human life; rather help them, rather encourage them (for they need it often, and profoundly appreciate it), rather treat them as being all they ought to be, a most potent incentive to any true man to live a true and noble life! And remember in doing so, Christ's own words upon this matter—for I will put my text at the end of my discourse instead of at the beginning: "He that heareth you heareth Me: he that receiveth you receiveth Me, and he that receiveth Me receiveth Him that sent Me: and he that despiseth you despiseth Me, and he that despiseth Me depiseth not Me, but Him that sent Me."

S. Ballarat.