

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

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

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

The Authority of the Christian Ministry.

THE present generation has witnessed a remarkable change in the relations of clergy and people. The change is more noticeable in the great towns and cities where the masses of the people congregate, but it has penetrated to the country districts as well; and the growth of democracy has developed a spirit of independence which has altered the attitude of the people towards those who minister to them in holy things. The days are gone when the clergy could command respect by reason of their office, and the many criticisms of their ways and doings, together with the caricatures which appear from time to time in the public Press, can be taken as a very fair index of the public mind.

Among the industrial sections of the community the idea is freely circulated that the clergy are the enemies of progress, and it is commonly believed that they are part of an economic system which the present generation has outgrown, and which is commonly regarded as responsible for the disabilities under which the people suffer. Whether they are right or wrong is a matter which does not affect the present argument. The existence of this state of mind will not be seriously denied.

The attempt has been made to reinstate the clergy in their former position by dwelling almost entirely upon the Divine authority of the ministry, but the results have not been altogether happy. There is a widespread dislike of any idea of exclusive privilege, and when such claims have been preferred they have either aroused bitter resentment or been met with apathetic indifference. There has been, of course, some response, but when the total population is taken into consideration, these results are surprisingly small. One of the most pressing needs of the present day is to arrive at some conception of the Christian ministry which will commend itself to the average lay mind. Jealousy and mutual suspicion are largely responsible for our "unhappy divisions" at the present day, and these, indicative as they are of serious differences of

opinion, will only be healed by the patient investigation of the points at issue, and the growth of mutual toleration and respect among those who take opposing sides. We need to go beneath the differences which divide, and discover some common platform where there is virtual agreement. From this standpoint we can approach the more difficult questions which have been aggravated by the bitter language of extremists on both sides. The teaching of the New Testament must always be the final court of appeal, and consequently a brief examination of some of the references to the functions of the Christian ministry should help forward the solution of the present problem.

I.

The New Testament references to the ministry can be divided into two main classes: (1) The passages which deal with the method of appointment; the ordination by an Apostle or an apostolic delegate; and the various functions discharged by those who had been thus ordained. (2) The passages which deal with the personal qualifications of the Christian minister, his spiritual gifts, blameless character, his manner of life, and the conscientious performance of his manifold duties. An examination of these passages shows that while the regular and formal appointment occupied an important place in the mind of the Apostles, yet equal, if not greater, stress was laid upon the personal qualifications which are described in the passages grouped in the second of the above-named classes. As so much has been said and written during the past few years upon the constitution of the Church, there is no need to enter upon an examination of the passages in the first group, and we can, therefore, limit our inquiry to the latter of these classes, and attempt to ascertain the significance of some of the passages which find a place under this heading.

1. The Epistles to the Thessalonians are the earliest of St. Paul's letters. An incidental reference in the last chapter of the first Epistle throws some light upon the relations of clergy and laity. The people are "to know" those who are set over

them in the Lord, they are "to esteem them highly in love." The words of the Apostle suggest a close, intimate relationship carrying with it the idea of confidence, appreciation, and respect for those in authority. At the same time the relationship is based upon rational grounds, it is because these presbyters and deacons show themselves worthy of such treatment, it is "for their work's sake."¹ These men labour among you, they admonish you, they call to your remembrance the Gospel of Christ, they preach the Word, guide those who need counsel and advice, seek the erring and the lost; in a word, they are the true shepherds of Christ's flock. St. Paul does not dwell upon their official position—he directs attention to their faithful ministry, to their personal character. Because of what they do, they deserve the support and willing submission of those for whose sake they sacrifice themselves.

2. A similar reference is to be found in St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians. Stephanas and his house are mentioned as worthy of respect because "they have set themselves to minister to the Saints." We are also told incidentally that this family were the "firstfruits of Achaia."² This Epistle therefore supplies us with an illustration of the statement in the Epistle of Clement of Rome to this same Church. "Preaching then in town and country, they (*i.e.*, the Apostles) appointed their first fruits, when they had tested them in the Spirit, for bishops and deacons of those who were about to become believers."³ Such a course of action is easily intelligible. The first converts in any town would, if otherwise suitable, be chosen to fill the responsible positions, and in the case of Stephanas his qualifications had been repeatedly displayed. Commenting on this passage, Godet writes: "The phrase *τάσσειν ἑαυτόν*, frequent in classic Greek . . . denotes a voluntary consecration. The reference is to their readiness to care for the poor and the sick and the afflicted, to charge themselves with the business of the Church, deputations, journeys, paying for them personally

¹ 1 Thess. v. 12-14.

² 1 Cor. xvi. 15, 16.

³ Clement, cxlii. Quoted by Gore, "Church and Ministry," p. 287.

(ἐαυτούς), as the delegates at present with the apostle had done."¹ In other words, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the valuable services Stephanas had rendered to the Church. He held an official position, it is true, but his personal worthiness was of greater importance in the Apostle's eyes; and it is to this he calls attention when the disorders within the Church threatened the loss of appreciation on the part of those who owed so much to his faithful service.

3. An important passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews will provide us with a third example. In chap. xiii. the author reminds his readers of those leaders who had entered into rest, and whose life and work were still fresh in their memory. They were the men who "spake the Word of God," and who in their lives had displayed a faith which was worthy of imitation.² The mention of these honoured names suggested a reference to their present ministers, but when he speaks about the duty of submission, he goes on to add, "for they watch in behalf of your souls as they that shall give account."³ The Christian presbyter stands in a pastoral relationship to his flock, and the faithful discharge of his manifold duties is given as the reason for the obedience and submission which is here enjoined.

4. The passages which have been briefly noticed are important because they describe some of the ordinary duties of the presbyters and deacons, and witness to the thorough and conscientious performance of these duties by those who held official positions. At the same time, the members of the primitive Church were not perfect; and it is not surprising to find instances where the high standard was not maintained. St. Paul addresses a solemn warning to Archippus,⁴ and at Philippi there was some disagreement between two of the deaconesses, Euodias and Syntyche, which needed correction.⁵ The teaching of the Pastoral Epistles betrays a consciousness of the peril to which the Church would be exposed if unworthy men were advanced to the rank of bishop (*i.e.*, presbyter) or deacon.⁶

¹ Godet, 1 Cor. ii. 466.

² Heb. xiii. 17.

³ Col. iv. 17.

⁴ Heb. xiii. 7.

⁵ Phil. iv. 2.

⁶ See 1 Tim. iii. 1-15, v. 22; Titus i. 5-9, etc.

The elder is not to be called to account for every scandalous story circulated about him, but he may be required to stand on his trial, and to be publicly rebuked, if he is found guilty of the fault laid to his charge.¹ The Epistle of St. Peter contains a reference to two of the dangers to which the Elders were exposed. The love of gain and the love of power were then, as now, motives which prompted some to undertake this holy work.² The Pastoral Epistles and the Epistles of St. Peter are generally supposed to belong to a comparatively late stage in New Testament literature, and they reveal a tendency at work to lower the standard of the qualifications required in the Christian minister. The advancement to any position of authority always carries with it certain temptations, and it is fatally easy for the pride which issues in the misuse of power to supplant the nobler and purer motives which first inspired the activity of the ministers of Jesus Christ. The weaknesses of human nature with which we are so familiar at the present day enable us to appreciate the significance of the New Testament references to the perils which threatened the Church in the latter part of the first century. The careful instructions which were given in the face of these circumstances show that in the mind of the inspired writers the faithful performance of the various ministerial duties was the matter of supreme importance. The ministry was appointed for the sake of the Church, "for the perfecting of the Saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ."³

5. Another important feature in the New Testament conception of the Church is the repeated insistence upon the responsibility of the laity. They are blameworthy if they allow themselves to be seduced by false teachers, and St. Paul's controversial arguments rest upon the assumption that his readers possess the capacity to distinguish between truth and error. The authority of the minister is to be measured by a standard accessible to every baptized Christian. The course of history is a striking commentary upon our Lord's words. His sheep, He said, "follow Him, for they know His voice. And a

¹ 1 Tim. v. 19, 20.² 1 Pet. v. 2, 3.³ Eph. iv. 12.

stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him, for they know not the voice of strangers. . . . My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”¹ Everyone is supposed to possess the requisite capacity to recognize the Truth; and the atrophy of this faculty is one of the most serious calamities which can happen to any man. It is nothing less than the moral blindness which makes salvation impossible. St. Paul invariably directed his appeal to the conscience of his hearers. The aim of every member of that devoted band of missionaries was to commend himself and his message “to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”² Thus when he writes to the Galatians to warn them of the peril they had incurred by receiving the Judaizing teachers, he impresses upon them their own responsibility; they ought to have tested the novel elements which these men had introduced by the truths they had already received. “Though we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that we have preached unto you, let him be accursed.”³ It would be difficult to find a better illustration of the Apostle’s method to test the validity of any given ministry. The message is more important than the messenger. The authority of the minister is determined, not by his official rank—had that been the case, the word of an angel from heaven would have been absolute and final—but by his fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁴

An important reference to these false teachers occurs in the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. They are there described as “false apostles, deceitful workers, *fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ*. And no marvel; for even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing, therefore, if his ministers fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness.”⁵ Now it is quite clear from this passage that these men professed to be apostles, and under cover of this claim sought to secure the acceptance of the system which it was their aim to impose upon the Church. It was a deliberate attempt to exercise

¹ St. John x. 4, 5, 27.

² 2 Cor. iv. 2, 3.

³ Gal. i. 8.

⁴ See also Phil. i. 15-18.

⁵ 2 Cor. xi. 13-15.

authority on the ground that they held an official position in the Christian Church. St. Paul, indeed, meets this claim with a counterclaim—he is “not a whit behind the very chiefest of the Apostles”; but the proof of his apostleship is to be found in his manner of life, and the sacrifices he had gladly made for the sake of his Lord.¹ Yet the final test is the character of the message: these men preach “another Jesus,” “a different gospel.”² The Corinthians had learned the truth from the lips of St. Paul; they ought to be able to detect the error of this new system. The knowledge of the truth “as it is in Jesus” carries with it a new responsibility; they must not allow any teacher, however gifted he may be, to lead them away from the simplicity of the Gospel they had received.

Some years elapsed before St. John wrote his Epistle. During that period false teachers had multiplied, but we find him in perfect agreement with St. Paul. The authority of the teacher is to be tested by the character of his message: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know we the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit which confesseth not Jesus, is not of God.”³

About one hundred years later Irenæus wrote to combat the Gnostic heresy, and his method for ascertaining the truth is noteworthy. We will quote from Bishop Lightfoot’s essay in his commentary on Philippians: “Amidst the competition of rival teachers, all eagerly bidding for support, the perplexed believer asks for some decisive test by which he may try the claims of the disputants. To this question Irenæus supplies an answer. ‘If you wish,’ he argues, ‘to ascertain the doctrine of the Apostles, apply to the Church of the Apostles. In the succession of Bishops, tracing their descent from the primitive age, and appointed by the Apostles themselves, you have a

¹ II Cor. xi. 5-12, 21-33.

² II Cor. xi. 4.

³ I John iv. 1-3.

guarantee, for the transmission of the pure faith, which no isolated, upstart, self-constituted teacher can furnish.”¹ The same method is employed by Tertullian. “Let them” (*i.e.*, the Gnostic teachers), he writes, “produce the account of the origin of their churches; let them unroll the line of their bishops, running down in such a way from the beginning that their first bishop shall have had for his authorizer and predecessor one of the Apostles, or the Apostolic men who continued to the end in their fellowship. . . . So now you who wish to exercise your curiosity to better profit in the matter of your salvation, run through the Apostolic Churches, where the very chairs of the Apostles still preside in their own places. . . . Make it your business to inquire what they have *learned* and *taught*.”² The teaching of Irenæus and Tertullian falls outside the scope of this inquiry, but a comparison of these statements with the New Testament will produce some interesting results. All the writers concerned are dealing with a situation in many respects similar; their aim was to safeguard the members of the Church from the influence of the false teachers. The New Testament writers lay stress upon the character of the message, and the human capacity to distinguish between truth and error. The later writers lay stress upon the episcopal succession; the truth is to be found in the tradition which has been handed down from the Apostles. In other words, the emphasis has been transferred from the message to the messenger. This change illustrates the process which had been gradually at work throughout the intervening period, and which went on side by side with the growth of ecclesiastical authority.

6. The foregoing inquiry has only dealt with one aspect of the Christian ministry, but it inevitably leads to the conclusion that in the books of the New Testament the possession of spiritual power was regarded as of greater importance than any particular method of ordination. Episcopacy has a long history;

¹ Lightfoot, “Philippians,” 239.

² Tertullian, “Præscriptiones,” xxxii.-xxxvi. Quoted from Gore, “Church and Ministry,” pp. 113, 114; the italics are mine.

it is an ancient and venerable institution, which links the Church of to-day with the Church of the sub-Apostolic age. Episcopacy, moreover, was the legitimate outcome of a process of development, the origin of which can be traced back to the age of the Apostles themselves. No Churchman to-day would wish to alter a system which we have inherited from the purest age of Christianity. It is quite another thing when we are asked to regard the ministry of non-Episcopal bodies as invalid, or at the best "precarious." If in the New Testament the emphasis is laid upon the personal character and the spiritual power of the minister, we are, in fact, departing from the spirit of the New Testament if we place the emphasis somewhere else. Every society must have its officers and rules, which are binding upon its members; but it is fatally easy to regard organization as of greater importance than the life, and to lose spiritual power while rigidly adhering to the performance of certain ceremonial forms.

II.

The practical value of an inquiry of this kind can be illustrated by its bearing upon our present-day troubles:

1. It provides an explanation of one of the principal causes of the religious chaos of the present day. "Our unhappy divisions" are largely attributable to the transference of the emphasis from the personal character to the official status of the minister. Canon Henson has pointed out that "ecclesiastical authority, as such, was irrevocably damaged at the Reformation."¹ Doubtless there were faults on both sides, but it can be safely said that, had the leaders of the Church of the pre-Reformation period shown a zeal for righteousness, and a genuine interest in the welfare of the people—in a word, had they been true shepherds of Christ's flock—the pages of history would have told a very different story. The Puritan objections to many of the practices retained by the Church appear childish to the present generation, but our judgment

¹ Henson, "Moral Discipline in the Christian Church," 156.

will be modified when we remember that they were the product of a deeply-rooted suspicion of a system which had wrought sad havoc in the Church of Christ. The Nonconformist churches to-day do not stand exactly where their Puritan forefathers stood; the passage of time has witnessed many changes in their teaching and practice, but they have inherited a strong prejudice against the historic Church; they stand for certain principles which it is our bounden duty to respect, especially when we remember our own faults in the past days. The cultivation of more friendly relations with these churches would be beneficial to all parties concerned. Much progress has been made in this direction during the past few years, and there are good reasons to believe that the movement will increase in power and usefulness.

2. The English Church, in her authoritative formularies, strikes no uncertain note in the description of the functions of the priesthood; the priests are to be "messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord, to teach and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family, to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ for ever."¹ The solemn and very beautiful address from which this quotation is taken, is read in the hearing of every priest at his ordination; the words of counsel and exhortation are gathered almost entirely from the New Testament description of the duties of Christian presbyters, the class of passages which have been the subject of the present inquiry. It is quite clear that, in the mind of the compilers of the Book of Common Prayer, the importance of both the personal and official aspects of the Christian ministry were fully recognized; and the witness of experience goes to show that wherever "the pure word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered," and wherever the duties of a pastor are faithfully performed, there is no lack of response on the part of God's people. The Word of God appeals to the heart of mankind,

¹ "The Ordering of Priests."

and when that "Word" is commended by the Christ-like life of the minister, his authority as a Minister of the Word and Sacraments will rest upon a sure foundation. Those who have been blessed through his ministry will rally round him to co-operate in the work of building up and extending the Church.

We set out to find some conception of the Christian ministry which will commend itself to the average lay mind. The suspicion with which ecclesiastical claims are commonly regarded is not altogether without foundation, but on all sides there is a readiness to acknowledge the authority of goodness. The combination of a Christ-like life with official appointment will not only reinstate the clergy in their former position, but will also raise them to a higher position, and endow them with a wider and more permanent authority. This, and nothing less than this, is the conception of the ministry found in the formularies of the English Church.

W. ESCOTT BLOSS.

NOTE.—Some reference to the Charismatic ministry would have considerably strengthened the main contention in the foregoing argument. The omission was intentional, partly because it was not desirable to introduce a subject which would have been very inadequately treated within the compass at our disposal, but more especially because the argument is sufficiently strong to dispense with such additional aid. The points referred to are those with which mankind is familiar, and which everyone is able to appreciate. It is through attention to these resemblances between the Church in the New Testament and the Church of to-day that we shall best help forward the cause of Christian unity which all Christians have at heart.

