The Provision of an Adequate Ministry: Some Historical Reflections*

F. S. DOWNS

(*Continued from previous number*)

The Constantinian Period (A.D. 313—A.D. 1500)

The Constantinian era in the history of the church can only be understood against its ideological background—the concept of Christendom, in which church and state play complimentary roles and are in some measure dependent upon each other. For upwards of 1,200 years Christians sought to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The experiment failed because the conception was ill-founded but nevertheless it left its mark upon all subsequent ecclesiastical history.

During this period the conception of the clergy as a distinct caste which had begun in the earlier period became firmly established. The former resistance to the external marks of this distinction in manner of dress and living all but disappeared. Even as the chief function of the church came to be that of 'sacrament bearer' the priest became the mediator of the sacraments and a ceremonial functionary. Everything else was secondary. It is, of course, true that the sacramental system itself expanded to the point where it provided a kind of pastoral service, touching every important event in the life of the individual. The sacramental-pastoral function of the priest was most clearly embodied in the growing importance of Penance. More explicit pastoral functions such as visiting the sick and bereaved as well as the teaching functions of the ministry were from time to time encouraged (as, for instance, during the Carolingian revival), but by and large such activities were ignored.

Distinct clerical dress was now not only permissible but required. Clerical celibacy became the ideal (though all too often

* A paper read at the N.C.C. Consultation on 'The Sacramental Life of the Local Congregation and the Provision of an Adequate Ministry' held at Nagpur in October, 1963.

honoured in the breach). The clergy were further set apart by being exempted from certain obligations to the state. At least the higher clergy came to occupy a position of privilege in the society. Their separation from the ordinary world was underlined by the developing practice of having the clergy live together in semi-monastic communities under the direction of the bishop or some other senior ecclesiastic.

This separation of the regular clergy into a withdrawn and 'higher' spiritual order was in no small measure due to the rapid development of monasticism and the widespread popular belief that the monks represented a spiritual elite. The role of monasticism during this period is of great interest for in a very real sense it was a remnant of the early charismatic ministry. Try as it might the church has never been able to completely suppress this kind of ministry. Again and again a ministry has been raised up claiming no other authority than that of the Spirit as evidenced in the quality of its life. At its best monasticism provided such a ministry. Throughout this period there was tension between the monastic orders and the official appointive hierarchy of the church—tensions arising in no small measure out of the fact that the orders refused to be bound to this world. As soon as one order was 'tamed' another would rise up to challenge the established clergy. Nowhere is this challenge more clearly seen than in that great 'Age of Faith' which reached its zenith in the thirteenth century. At no other period in the history of the church has the clerical hierarchy had more power. And yet that hierarchy was often either challenged or ignored by the great monastic orders. The challenge had begun with Cluny which undertook the reform of the church with or without the support of the clergy and it was carried forward by the Dominicans and Franciscans and the various other mendicant orders. Where they thought it necessary the monks virtually established rival church organizations. This happened in Ireland and in the missions established by the British missionaries in Northern Europe. Almost alone monasticism challenged the presuppositions of the Constantinian era and sought, at least initially, to remain free of temporal support and control. It is possible to argue that the Reformation took place because by the fifteenth century the force of monasticism as a challenge to the appointive hierarchy had been spent. The age of the prophets had once again drawn to a close. The Spirit nevertheless provides its ministers where the church fails to provide ministers of the Spirit.

Following the Constantinian establishment the appointment of the clergy became formalized and increasingly under the control of the temporal powers. At first this control was indirectly exercised through the manipulation of synods but later on even this façade tended to be dropped! Theoretically the choice of the bishops still lay with the people and the lower clergy and sometimes, though now rarely, the populace had a dominant influence. We see examples of this in the elevation of Athanasius,

Ambrose, Augustine, and even much later in the selection of Urban VI. Generally speaking, however, the emperor—and later the princes—gained control of appointments to at least the higher offices. The qualifications of those so appointed were often more political than spiritual. There were a number of reform movements, the principal object of which was to free the church from such control, but they were never entirely successful. The church was trapped by its own conception of Christendom. The lower clergy were appointed by the bishops, but in some cases even this power was limited by the control certain princes had over the 'livings' they endowed within their territory. Once again the old maxim, 'he who pays the piper calls the tune', proved valid.

This was not a period in which great attention was given to training the clergy. The only training received was that provided by service in the lower orders. The lower clergy were largely ignorant and there were few who saw the need for raising the standards at this level. Their function did not demand it. The widespread practice of 'sub-letting' parishes to poorly educated and poorly paid men by absentee incumbents did not help. Parish priests were thus hired men who did not even understand the Latin of the Mass and who had almost no knowledge of the Bible. Even when universities began to be established it was not with the thought of training men for the parish ministry. University graduates, though in orders, were destined for 'higher' things befitting their noble origins. They were absorbed in the central administrative structure of the diocese or the papal court—a precedent not without significance for India today! Priests were not generally expected to preach.

Some efforts were made by the reform-minded to raise the standards of the parish priest. Often this was attempted by requiring a period of residence in a metropolitan cathedral community where they would be exposed to higher learning. The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) even went so far as to require the establishment of a chair of theology in every metropolitan cathedral. Others sought to raise the standards through the publication of books of instruction and homilies that could be read to the people by the priest (if he could read). But even the reformers thought they were doing well if they could succeed in getting the priests to preach as many as four times a year.[1] In these efforts much depended upon the attitude of the local bishops, and most did not bother. It was into this breach that the popular preaching orders, especially the Dominicans, stepped. It is probably no coincidence that the same Lateran Council that established chairs of theology in the metropolitan cathedrals attempted to prevent the establishment of the Dominican order. There was still nothing in the church even approximating the general theological training of a later period.

---

[1] *See* K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York, 1953), pp. 525–528.

Like all other matters pertaining to the life of the medieval church, the question of the support of the clergy is an extremely complex one. As a rule the church (or the state) assumed complete responsibility for the support of the clergy (especially the higher clergy), but of equal significance is the fact that the earlier conception of self-support as a spiritual ideal never completely died out.

We have noted that in the earlier period efforts to have the clergy fully supported arose out of two motives. The first was the desire to have a full-time 'separate' sacerdotal ministry. The second was to prevent the abuses inherent in the self-supporting system. In the fourth and fifth centuries those who advocated full support got their way. First certain occupations were forbidden. The clergy could not be involved in trade. They could not be magistrates because the severe sentences of the law were inconsistent with the gospel (one notable exception: Ambrose—though he himself believed his profession disqualified him). They could not be soldiers nor could they engage in any of the trades that contributed to war—such as ironsmithing. They could not now be physicians or barbers because both professions involved bloodletting. The trend was to increasingly limit clerical occupation in secular work. In 452, in fact, the Emperor, Valentinian III, forbade the higher clergy from engaging in any gainful occupation. This did not affect the lower clergy, particularly in rural areas, who had of necessity to continue at least partially supporting themselves.

Following the fifth century there tended to be a relaxation of the restrictions and the clergy once again became involved in even the specifically proscribed occupations. Much of this renewed activity did not replace church support but often supplemented it for the personal enrichment of the clergy. Those who had to supplement their ecclesiastical income out of *necessity* were looked down upon by the other clergy. Thus Pope Agatho (seventh century) sent a letter with envoys to Constantinople apologizing for the fact that some of them were poor men who had to work with their hands and pleading that the wealthier presbyters of that city should not despise them on this account.[2]

Church finance became more elaborate. The major source of income was no longer the free-will offering but endowments (it has been estimated that by the sixteenth century the church owned half the land of Europe) and the compulsory tithe. Substantial gifts of money and property were made to the church by the wealthy in the belief that their place in heaven might be thereby assured. The church certainly did not discourage the idea. The church's wealth was controlled by the bishops who now became the principal beneficiaries among the clergy. In the fifth century Pope Simplicius said that church income should be divided into

[2] *See* F. J. F. Jackson, *History of the Christian Church to A.D. 461* (London, 1914), p. 571.

quarters and distributed in the following manner: one quarter to the bishop, one quarter for all the other clergy, one quarter for the maintenance of the services and buildings, and one quarter for the poor. Charity had long since ceased to be the major objective of church finance. What this meant in practical terms can be seen if we take the third century Roman church as an example. If the yearly income of that church had been a lakh of rupees, the bishop would have received Rs.25,000, the clergy Rs.470 each (on the average), and the dependents only Rs.17 each. Inequity between the higher and lower clergy in the matter of support was characteristic of this period. Thus the higher clergy was drawn from the nobility and the lower from the peasant class. The parish priests had great difficulty in making ends meet. Various devices were introduced to improve their position. When the parish system was introduced in the sixth century the priest was permitted to keep two-thirds of the local income—the remainder going to the bishop. 'Contributions' for special services like marriages and funerals, which in fact became fees, also supplemented the priest's income.

The strictly ecclesiastical income was not the only source of support. The state itself aided the clergy in various ways. From the days of Constantine, for instance, the clergy were exempt from taxation. Sometimes direct grants for the support of the clergy were made—it was the distribution of such funds that precipitated the Donatist controversy in North Africa.

Finance was at the heart of many of the corruptions of the medieval church. The increasing financial dependence upon temporal sources led to the increasing control of the church by temporal authorities (who claimed the right of investiture) and a scramble for lucrative church offices which were often literally for sale in the open market. Politics and the church became hopelessly entangled. Despite the efforts of numerous reformers the system itself generally overpowered them.

Thus the system of full support for the clergy, which had originally been introduced to counteract the abuses inherent in clerical occupation in temporal business and to make it possible for the ministers to give full-time service, had come in itself to be a source of corruption. This did not necessarily represent an indictment upon the idea of a fully supported clergy. What it did reveal was the danger inherent in the wrong kind of support. The increasing temporal power of the clergy together with the lucrative incomes of the higher offices was responsible. The very devil of personal ambition and greed which the fifth century had attempted to put out of the church by forbidding the gainful employment of the clergy returned sevenfold within the organization of the church itself.

It is against this background that the full significance of the ministry provided by medieval monasticism must be seen. Monasticism represented a reaction against the whole financial structure of the church, reviving the ideal of a self-supporting ministry,

not simply as a practical expedient but as a religious ideal. From its origins in third-century Egypt, Christian monasticism had stood for self-support. From the basket-weaving hermit monks of the Nile Valley to the more highly organized economic life of the monasteries, the ideal was maintained. In so far as was possible the monastery was an economically self-sufficient community in which all the necessary labour was done by the monks themselves. In part this implemented the belief that the community should be entirely separated from the world. But it also represented the conviction that manual work was good for the soul. Such work was a part of the monk's spiritual discipline. As opposed to the growing affluence of at least the higher clergy, the monastic movement idealized poverty as spiritually beneficial.

It is true that monasticism in the end was caught in the same snare when scholarly monks grew disdainful of manual work and endowments by the wealthy led to monastic affluence. But when it did new orders were raised up that put into practice the old ideals.

The relative freedom of the monasteries from state and even church support (and control) made them natural centres of reform. Despite the opposition of the church they often exercised a vital ministry to the Christian community—especially in the realm of teaching and preaching. But beyond this the monastic organization proved to have great practical value in relation to certain forms of Christian work. One thinks especially of the role of monasticism in medieval mission operations. While individual missionaries had from time to time been sent out by the churches, the Constantinian pattern of support was not well suited to such operations. It was difficult to finance missions in places with which there were insufficient communications and no friendly government. This was especially true following the disruptions caused by the barbarian invasions and the breakdown of the old Roman Empire. The monastic community proved to be the ideal instrument of missionary work in this situation. Bainton thus describes its significance:

> 'The task of converting and Christianizing the northern peoples was stupendous in view of the disorder, hampered communication, and nonviable currency. New methods were imperative, and new functions, imperceptibly at first but inevitably, accrued to the Church and the clergy. Rome could commission missionaries to the North but thereafter they were on their own. No missionary boards could finance them with bank drafts or postal money orders. They would have to be self-sustaining and there was only one way by which they could support themselves in a rural society and that was on the land. They acquired ground already domesticated or themselves undertook to fell the forests or drain the swamps. No agency of the Church was so well adapted to this task as the monastery . . . Groups of monks could form a community and establish a self-sufficient life with their own

fields, vineyards, graineries, fish ponds, rabbitries, and orchards.'[3]

It is interesting to note in passing that similar ideas of mission support when only limited funds were available were advanced much later by men like Count Zinzendorf and William Carey. The method is well illustrated in the self-supporting Serampore mission.[4] Of all the forms of ministry in the Constantinian era it is perhaps this one that offers the most useful precedent for our own purposes. One thinks immediately of the potentialities of the Christian *ashram.* This approach combines the advantages of self-support with the spiritual discipline of the community—a discipline that helps overcome the temptations of involvement in secular occupations.

While monasticism represented a significant exception to the rule, by and large the ministry of the church in the Constantinian period was supported by an extensive and complex system of ecclesiastical finance. At the parish level standards—both moral and intellectual—were low and while the sacraments were provided the Word was not. The result was uncontrolled and uninstructed popular Christianity which often amounted to little more than baptized superstition. This was the setting of the Reformation conception of the ministry.

The Reformation Period (A.D. 1500—A.D. 1600)

The Reformation itself did not destroy the idea of Christendom. The major Reformers were fully as devoted to it as were their papal opponents. It is true that voices of opposition were beginning to be raised here and there but they were only faint and largely unheard heralds of the post-Christian era. But the Reformation did greatly change the traditional conception of the ministry both with respect to function and training. The church continued its marriage with the state, but to the Reformers (especially those on the Continent) the work of the minister in the society was not that of a chaplain but of a prophet.

The change was not so much one of total conception as it was of emphasis. Though their wording varied, the principal Reformers would have agreed with Pauck's summation of their doctrine of the church:

> 'Where the Word of God is rightly preached and heard and the sacraments are rightly administered and received.'[5]

The church was not to be identified by its traditions and visible pomp—as had been the popular medieval conception—but by whether or not it delivered what it had been established

---

[3] H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams, eds., *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1956), pp. 85-86.

[4] *See* W. Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen* (London, 1792), pp. 73-74, for his arguments on behalf of this method of mission operation.

[5] Niebuhr and Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

to deliver. The new emphasis was upon preaching. The sacrament-bearing definition of the church came to be regarded as insufficient. Disregarding the hierarchy in their definition of the essence of the church, the Reformers shifted the main responsibility for realizing the true ministry to the shoulders of the parish minister. Never since the early bishop-pastors had become diocesan bishops had the church placed so much emphasis upon the role of the parish minister.

When the Reformers made this shift in emphasis they, for understandable reasons, became greatly concerned about the conditions of the parish ministry of that day. The reformation of the office of the parish priest became one of their chief objectives. The force of their activity along these lines was so great, in fact, that it inevitably influenced the papal party which at the Council of Trent instituted its own though less radical reforms at this level. To the Reformers an uneducated and often despised parish ministry, the chief function of which was to officiate at the sacraments and other ceremonial occasions, was anathema. To them the ideal parish minister was not a religious functionary but a prophet; not a command post orderly but a front-line officer.

Even in those reformed churches which preserved an essentially priestly conception of the ministerial office, it was a different kind of priesthood than that generally accepted as adequate in the medieval period. Thus when speaking of the priestly tradition within the Anglican church (though he admits that it was not prominent before the Catholic revival of the nineteenth century) E. R. Hardy says:

> 'The dignity of the priest comes from his union with the priestly work of his crucified Master, and is therefore only truly realized when the priestly life is in a real sense a life of sacrifice.'[6]

This understanding of the priestly character of the minister is not based upon the analogy of the Jewish priests who were simply functionaries in the temple, but upon that of the suffering servant. The Christocentric conception of priesthood again places tremendous emphasis upon the parish priest who is the most real embodiment of it.

As a result of the new attitude efforts were made in all the reformed churches to remove abuses and raise the standards of the parish ministry. The voice of the parish pulpit was once again a force to be reckoned with—and perhaps nowhere so much so as in the person of the parish minister of Geneva, John Calvin. It is interesting to note that a number of the principal reformers never held a post in the church higher than this. The result of this renewed emphasis was to establish higher standards than had ever been established before for the ministry at this level. This is part of the reason for our present difficulties in India. If

[6] H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams, eds., *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1956), p. 151.

we judged adequacy by medieval standards we would have no problem. But the Reformation dealt a death-blow to at least the traditional patterns of a limited ministry, that is, a ministry limited in training and function. Thus when limited ministries have been introduced out of necessity (or so it was thought), since that time they have been regarded as at best temporary expedients. An example of this is to be seen in the catechists and evangelists of the nineteenth century mission organizations and even those ordained men who were, as Bishop Hollis reminds us, until relatively recently identified as 'Native Assistants'.[7] These were limited ministries. But the conscience of the Protestant communities at least has been unable to accept the idea of such limitation as normative. This is certainly at the root of the dissatisfaction with the present patterns of ministry in India.

The Reformers approached the task of improving the parish ministry from three directions. In the first place they sought to regulate the selection of ministers, giving more attention to spiritual qualifications. Here the English Puritan conception of the 'converted ministry' is typical. Secondly, they sought to raise the educational level of the ministry. Thirdly, they attempted to place the ministry on a more satisfactory economic basis.

Spiritual qualifications in the minds of the Reformers had nothing to do with a willingness to live a distinct 'spiritual' life different from that of other Christians. They categorically rejected the caste conception of clerical spirituality. The minister acted as the representative of the whole body, the priesthood of believers, and not as a member of a special order which received its authority and function from a self-perpetuating and spiritually independent hierarchy. Even within the reformed churches of episcopal order the representative character of the bishop was stressed. The succession of faith and order was, as in the early church, a succession in which the whole church participated; it was not simply the succession of a caste. The church was not now defined in relation to the functions of the hierarchy. Rather the hierarchy (in so far as it existed) was defined in terms of the functions of the whole people. There was still a distinction between clergy and laity but it was now a distinction based upon function alone rather than involving an idea of separate spiritual status. The breakdown of the medieval conception of the clergy was nowhere more explicit than in the universal reintroduction of clerical marriage among the Reformers. So powerful was this symbol, in fact, that the principal Reformers seem to have regarded marriage as virtually obligatory for them. Thus Luther who was already something of a confirmed bachelor felt constrained to marry the former nun, Catherine von Bora—and thus,

---

[7] M. Hollis, *Paternalism and the Church: A Study of South Indian Church History* (London, 1962), p. 52.

incidentally, founding what was to become a classic example of the Christian household.

The emphasis upon the need for an educated ministry arose out of the Reformation conviction that the word must always be proclaimed in conjunction with the sacrament. There was a tremendous emphasis upon preaching—largely because this aspect of the minister's function had been almost totally ignored by the medieval church. But as matters stood the parish priests simply did not have the training to adequately fulfil this function. Therefore the matter had to be approached from two sides. First, something had to be done to help the existing ministers. For this purpose homilies were prepared for the ministers to read. The Protestant minister was now expected to preach at every major service of worship, certainly whenever the sacraments were administered. This represented a considerably higher standard than that of the medieval reformers who had thought that if the priests could be persuaded to preach four times a year that would be doing well. But homilies were only a temporary measure. A solider education had to be provided for the future ministers of the church. Thus in Germany the princes were given the responsibility of establishing secondary schools and universities, the primary purpose of which was to train the clergy. Calvin founded the Academy, which later became the University of Geneva, for this same purpose. It was not thought that what we would call pastoralia needed to be taught. This kind of training would be provided by a kind of apprenticeship in the church itself. A broad education in the humanities—which included what we would call theological subjects—was considered sufficient. The emphasis upon academic preparation was symbolized in the substitution of the scholar's gown for the traditional vestments in worship.

Though the Reformers emphasized an educated ministry, it is interesting to note that it was the Counter-Reformation that produced the first theological seminaries in the more modern sense. The Council of Trent provided for the establishment of such seminaries for the purpose of giving practical and pietistic training to priests. Among Protestants the independent or semi-independent theological college did not begin to appear until the nineteenth century.

Whatever the method of imparting the education, it was universally accepted among the Reformers that the ministerial function was too important to be left in the hands of the untrained. All would have agreed with the words of Richard Baxter:

> 'What qualifications are necessary for that man that hath such a charge upon him as we have! How many difficulties of divinity to be opened! . . . How many obscure texts of Scripture to be expounded! How many duties to be done, wherein ourselves and others may miscarry, if in the matter . . . they be not well informed! . . . How many weighty and yet intricate cases of conscience have we almost daily to resolve!

Can so much work and such work as this be done by raw, unqualified men ?'[8]

In dealing with the economic aspect of ministerial reform no entirely new approach was introduced by the Reformers. They simply sought to regulate and distribute more evenly the support available. The reintroduction of clerical marriage made the problem more acute, especially in the case of the rural ministers. These hard-pressed Protestant ministers often had to supplement their meagre church income by working in the fields or following some craft. The Reformers were generally of the opinion that this situation was undesirable and at the root of many of the abuses of the medieval period. They therefore sought to establish a fully supported ministry. Their problem was complicated by the fact that immediately following the Reformation the medieval machinery of support through compulsory tithes, fees, and endowments broke down in many places. Some of these sources of income—particularly the compulsory tithes and fees for religious services—were regarded by some as inconsistent with Reformation principles and so were discontinued. Income from church property which had been a major source of support was cut off when that property was confiscated by the princes. But when conditions became more normalized the heads of states were once again expected to assume responsibility for the support of the clergy. Clerical stipends were fixed and conditions greatly improved. The ideal, though not always the practice, thus was a fully supported ministry which did not have to be anxious about where the next meal was coming from or be diverted from its many duties. This pattern was adopted for practical reasons and had nothing to do with the earlier idea of the clergy as a distinct spiritual elite which must be separated from the world.

Though outside the limits of this paper, a word should be said about the advent of the 'free' church which in fact, if not always in theory, has in our own times become the prevalent form of the church. The free church in the sense I am using that term here is the non-established church. It first appeared in countries where it was the organized expression of a minority Christian group. The first important free church was the Reformed Church of France. In the seventeenth century a number of free churches appeared in Great Britain, and following the American revolution it became the only form of Christianity in that country. The free church pattern was spread throughout the world by the nineteenth century missionary movement—though the question can still be raised as to whether churches heavily dependent upon foreign subsidies are in fact free churches. In their case mission establishments have simply replaced state establishments.

[8] Quoted by W. S. Hudson in H. R. Niebuhr and D. D. Williams, eds., *The Ministry in Historical Perspective* (New York, 1956), p. 203.

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the free church pattern lies in the realm of finance. The free church is entirely dependent upon internal resources. At first such churches had great difficulty in adequately supporting their pastors. Again the case of William Carey affords a good illustration. His stipend was so low as the pastor of a small Baptist congregation in the Midlands that he had to supplement it by teaching and shoemaking. This is undoubtedly why Carey placed so much emphasis upon financial organization. But gradually, following the example set by John Wesley in the organization of the finances of the Methodist societies, the free churches developed a financial system built upon the giving of the members. The financial system of the free church was probably most highly developed in the American churches. Ministers and other workers were put on fixed stipends and business practices such as the annual budget and organized stewardship campaigns were introduced.

Summary

Within the limited scope of this paper I have tried to bring out not just the facts but the real problems that lay behind the various attempts the church has made to provide an adequate ministry. I have tried to show how selection and qualification are closely related to expectation—for 'adequate' is after all a relative term. What is the minister expected to do? Is the parish minister a primary or secondary agent in the mission of the church? Is he a chaplain or a prophet? Is he a ceremonial functionary or a teacher? I have in the second place tried to show that the question of methods of support is both an ideological and practical problem. Should the minister be a part of the world or separate from it? Should he symbolically identify himself with his people by engaging in some manual craft, however perfunctorily, or should he devote his entire time to religious duties? Can a ministry, which must support itself through secular work, escape from the corruptions which in the past have often followed? Can self-support be combined with sufficient spiritual discipline to avoid this danger? Can the ministry be limited without becoming degraded? I hope that these brief historical reflections will have thrown some light on our current problems in India and illuminated at least some of the stumbling-blocks which should be avoided in finding our own answers.

(*Concluded*)

Christ like the sun, too bright to look upon, reveals his luminous power by the fresh colours he awakens in the wide garden of the world.

Austin Farrer: Saving Belief