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Baptists and the Ministry

THE MINISTRY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

"EVERYTHING is what it is and not another thing," wrote Joseph Butler. And, in thinking about the Ministry in the local church or in the denomination, it is important to remember at the outset that the Ministry is different from, and far greater than the minister. The minister is one of the agents and instruments of the Ministry; the Ministry itself is nothing less than the service offered by the whole Church to Jesus Christ and His Cause, whether those engaged in it have been ordained or not. This was finely expressed by a former Bishop of Winchester, who wrote: "Do not take clergy to be meant when Church is said, nor say Church when you mean clergy. Church work is Church work, not clergy work . . . The powers and promises and privileges of the Church are assured to the Church, and not to the clergy. The healthy life and activity of the Church belong to the Church, not to the clergy. So also do the abuses of the Church and the backward shortcomings of the Church belong, not to the clergy but to the whole Church . . . Church work is that living contact of spirit with spirit in which the whole Church is necessarily engaged."¹ Indeed, if we are to see the matter in its true perspective, we must go further still and say that the ministry of the Church, imperfect though it must always be in its human aspect, is really the ministry of the Living Christ Himself who has chosen to accomplish His purposes through the agency of men and women dedicated to His Cause. The ministry of the Son of God when on earth was his offering of love and obedience to his Father in Heaven—an offering that was finally consummated in the gift of himself upon the Cross. When the time came for Jesus to be "exalted above the heavens" (as the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it) he committed this ministry to his people. But the ministry remains one ministry on earth and in heaven, and its author and inspirer is still the Living Christ, who, by His Spirit, guides and empowers all who seek to do His will and extend His kingdom. Its pattern is that set by Him who "though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant" (*Phil.* 2^{8f}).

The corporate ministry of Christ's people is the truth which is

¹George Ridding. *Life*, p. 207.

expressed in the phrase "The Priesthood of all Believers." The meaning of these words has often been misunderstood, as if they merely affirmed the "priesthood" of every individual believer. This is undoubtedly a part of what they signify; but, taken in isolation, this interpretation may easily be used to justify a proud individualism which is in strange contrast to the spirit of Jesus. In fact, a study of the relative Scripture passages shews that the "priesthood of all believers" is really a description of the work of Christ's people taken in its corporate aspect². It is the ministry of the whole Church, in the sense indicated by Bishop Ridding's words quoted above, and the phrase is consequently meaningless unless charged with the spirit of brotherly affection and mutual subordination under the Lordship of Christ.

Having recognized this, we must now go on to say that the fellowship of Christ's service is an *organised* fellowship. This is one of the points at which the "Catholic" conception of the ministry differs from that of the Reformed tradition to which Baptists belong. To a Catholic (whether Roman or other) the word "organised" is totally inadequate to express the act by which the Christian Ministry is constituted. He believes that a specific form of ministry was established by Jesus Christ as part of the structure of the Church which He created, and that, apart from this "ministerial priesthood"—as it has been called—with its authenticating apostolic succession of bishops, there can be no true Church. It is not necessary to state here the objections to this view, which are felt not only by Free Church scholars but also by others who, although belonging to the episcopalian tradition, nevertheless do not accept this account of the relationship of the Ministry to the Church. For our present purpose, it is more important to recognize that, in repudiating the Catholic conception of the Ministry, Free Churchmen must resist the temptation to fly to the other extreme and abandon altogether an "organic" view of the Ministry. For, while the Christian Church is indeed a fellowship or family of God's people, yet it is also a Society which has been commissioned by Jesus Christ to undertake a specific task, namely, to make disciples of all peoples and train them to do His will (*Matt.* 28.19). And the New Testament tells us that for this purpose the Church has been divinely equipped with appropriate officers.³ Ministers are therefore not to be regarded merely as a useful addition to the life of the Church which could actually get on very well without them. Nor is the orderly provision of ministers for the Church a matter of expediency or convenience which may be omitted at will.

²Cf. 1 Peter 2, 5-9; Revelation 1, 6; 5, 10; 20, 6. The subject is discussed at length in *B.Q.* XVI, 3 (July, 1955) and XVII, 7 (July, 1958).

³1 Corinthians 12, 28; Ephesians 4, 11f.

It is a duty which the Church owes to her Master, and which is essential to her life in the service of the Gospel. The Ministry, like the Church, rests upon the Will of Jesus Christ, and while individual ministers may prove incompetent, or morally unfit to occupy the office that they hold, such human frailty is no justification for trying to dispense with Ministers altogether, but only a further reason why the Church should take very seriously the task of choosing and training them.

This has always been the practically unanimous view of the Church, and it was shared by our Baptist forefathers. For example, in a sermon delivered by Dr. Samuel Stennett at the ordination of Abraham Booth in 1769,⁴ the preacher said :

“The office (i.e. of the Ministry) then is not of political invention, no, nor an institution merely of wise and good men; but it is, I will be bold to affirm, of divine appointment. This, I think, everyone who believes his Bible must acknowledge.”

(The whole sermon is a most earnest and affectionate exposition of the duties of a church to its minister :

“The grand thing is the having a real, cordial, prevailing affection for him.”)

With this may be compared Article XXVI 8 of the Baptist Confession of 1677⁵ (which McGlothlin describes as “the most influential and important of all Baptist Confessions”):

“A particular Church, gathered, and compleately (*sic*) organized according to the Mind of Christ, consists of officers and members; and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the Church (so-called and gathered) for the peculiar administration of Ordinances and execution or power or duty . . . are bishops or elders and deacons.”

From this view of the Ministry derives the importance attached in most Christian Denominations to the Service of Ordination in which the setting-apart of ministers for the work of the Church is specifically related to the Will of Christ for His people. This divine authority holds good even when the Church chooses its ministers by popular election—witness the opinion of Isaac Watts in his *Letter to the Church of Christ assembled at Mark Lane* (1702):⁶

⁴*A Charge and Sermon . . . delivered at the Ordination of the Rev. Mr. Abraham Booth, 1769, p. 66.*

⁵*Baptist Confessions of Faith, W. J. McGlothlin.*

⁶*Baptist Register, Vol. III, pp. 515ff.*

“Though the pastor be named and chosen to this office by the people, yet his commission and power to administer all divine ordinances is not derived from the people, for they had not this power in themselves, but it proceeds from our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only King of his Church and the principal of all power; and he has appointed in his Word that the call of his Church and solemn ordination shall be the means whereby his Ministers are invested with this authority.”

We notice next that not merely is there room in the Church for a diversity of officers or ministers, but that, without such diversity, the whole corporate life of the Church would lose its peculiar meaning and effectiveness. Thus, in his well-known metaphor of the Church as a “body,” St. Paul says: “As in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ” (*Rom. 12^{ff.}*. Cf. *I Cor. 12^{ff.}*: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one”). Such variety is essential, for “if all were a single organ, where would the body be” (*I. Cor. 12th*). Whether anything is to be gained by discussing what ministers, if any, are more “essential” or “necessary” to the Church than the rest, is a doubtful question. There is a story told of Florence Nightingale that, when she and her band of volunteer nurses were approaching the Crimea, some of her helpers were indulging in romantic speculations about what they were going to do for the poor wounded soldiers; whereupon Miss Nightingale remarked grimly: “The strongest of you will be wanted at the wash-tub.” No doubt some of those deputed to that work were tempted to regard it as a poor reward for the sacrifices they were making. Yet who shall say that the ministry of the wash-tub was not as honourable in the sight of God and as necessary to the success of the whole undertaking as that of the Lady of the Lamp herself, though doubtless she got most of the praise? There are functions in the Church in the discharge of which all Christians, however modest their gifts, may have some share, while there are others which only a minority are capable of undertaking. Yet he would be a bold man who would maintain that none but the latter are “necessary” to the life of the Church. Indeed, to many Free Churchmen, there is something perilously near blasphemy in the notion held in some quarters that the episcopate, in particular, constitutes an “Essential Ministry” or sacred Order, without which the Church simply cannot exist. To repudiate this idea is not in any way to denigrate the episcopate as such,

nor to prejudice consideration of its value as part of the structure of the Church. It is simply to insist that no amount of special pleading must be allowed to obscure the truth that, while the New Testament gives priority to certain forms of ministry, it does not justify us in attributing absolute value to any of them. For that would be to put in question the special place and work of the Holy Spirit in the ongoing life of the Church, and weaken the immediate responsibility of all God's people to the sovereign authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This having been said, the importance to the Church of having a properly trained and constituted Ministry can hardly be exaggerated. In a recent article⁷, Dr. E. A. Payne grouped the functions which the Church expects its ministers to perform under the following five heads :

- The guardianship and proclamation of the Faith.
- Leadership in worship and administration of the Sacraments.
- Witnessing to, and safeguarding of the unity, continuity and universality of the Church.
- Shepherding of the flock.
- Setting of a personal example as "men of God."

To recall these functions is a sobering experience. None of them—in our Baptist view—is reserved exclusively to the ordained minister. All are shared in a measure by his people, and may be discharged at any time by a layman should the Church deem it right to call upon him for this purpose. Yet they are the peculiar responsibility of the minister as the one specially set apart and trained for this work. And they require for their regular and efficient discharge unusual abilities and skills of a high order. They also imply a representative activity of the Minister in relation both to his people and to God which is deeply costing, and makes great demands upon character. That in these circumstances the Church should attach unusual honour to the office of the Ministry is not therefore surprising, but is a fitting reflection of its prime importance in the life of the Church and the economy of Salvation.

This brings us to the important question of the authority of the Ministry, about which a great deal might be said—far more, in fact, than can be considered in a short article such as this. The basic principles seem to be two. First, the source of all authority for Christian people, whether considered individually or corporately, is none other than Jesus Christ. The phrase "The Crown Rights of the Redeemer" which was dear to our Free Church fathers, is no mere slogan to be chanted when the Church is faced with some unwarranted claim on the part of the State. It is a summary

⁷B.Q. XVII, 6, *The Ministry in Historical Perspective*, April, 1958.

statement of the truth that Jesus Christ alone is Lord over His people, and that, under the rule of His Spirit, the Church is empowered not only to guide her own life in peace and freedom, but also to act and speak with confidence in relation to the world outside. The Church belongs to Christ absolutely, and her holiness and usefulness depend upon her being under His authority alone.

Secondly, all authority in the Church is delegated authority—delegated first of all by Jesus Christ to His people, and then delegated by them, in appropriate ways, to others. Christians disagree upon the precise meaning of the words which Jesus used to Peter after his confession at Caesarea Philippi: "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church" (*Matt.* 16¹⁸). Yet in one sense or another, Jesus indubitably committed to His people both the responsibility and the right to speak and act in His name.⁸ There is indeed a note of special urgency and passion about this which breathes through the scriptural accounts of the closing stages of the earthly ministry of Jesus, and his last conversations with his disciples. He has finished, he says, the work which was given Him to do and is returning to his Father. But he is sending his disciples out to greater work still; they are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Yet they will not be going alone; for, in the power of his Spirit, he will continue to be with them, and whatever they ask in his name God will give them.⁹ These and the like declarations are of the greatest importance, for they testify to the confidence which Christ reposes in His people, and the far-reaching authority which He delegates to them to interpret His mind and execute His will.

The difficulty, as we all know, is how to translate these high and solemn assurances into the stuff of our common Christian life. And at no point is this more apparent than in the sphere of the Ministry, since it is there that, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Church delegates to others some of the authority with which she has been invested. The most notable example of this is in the Service of Ordination. Ordination is the act by which the Church solemnly and publicly designates a particular person in the Name of Jesus Christ for the work of the Christian ministry. There is considerable diversity in the forms used, which vary according to the denomination concerned. But all forms imply a certain transmission of authority, and point to the truth that no one may rightly act on behalf of the Church merely on his own initiative. He must first have been authorised to do so by the Church, however that word is understood. This is not to assert—I hasten to add—that nobody may open his mouth to preach the Gospel unless he has

⁸*Matthew* 18, 18ff; *John* 20, 22f; *I Corinthians* 2, 15ff.

⁹*John* 17, 4, 18: 14. 12ff. *Luke* 24. 47f. *Acts* 1, 8. *Matthew* 28, 20.

first received permission from the Church. St. Peter himself settled that notion once for all when he said to the ecclesiastical authorities at Jerusalem: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (*Acts 4^{19f}*). There is, as Dr. Wheeler Robinson said, a "prophethood of believers" no less than a "priesthood of believers"; and the Church should do everything in its power to encourage suitably gifted persons to take their share in the ministry of the Word. But it does not follow, because an individual is a Christian, that he may assume without further ado that he is entitled to speak and act *in the name of the Church*. To do that, he needs some sort of authorisation from those whom he claims to represent; and this is what ordination, among other things, purports to give.

This argument, if pushed to its logical extreme, might seem to require that all Church officers, whatever their functions, ought to be ordained. Indeed, at one period in our Baptist life, it was not unusual for elders to be ordained at the same time and in the same way as ministers; and, in principle, there is no reason why we should not continue this practice still. But conditions have changed; and, today, the service of ordination is usually confined to candidates for the regular ministry, as being a form of authorisation specially suited to those who are dedicating themselves to whole-time Christian service and who, as we have seen, are being charged with responsibilities of more than ordinary importance on behalf of the Church. That is no reason, however, why other appointments such as, for example, to the Diaconate, should not also be made the occasion for a suitable service in which attention can be directed to the significance of the office concerned in the life of the Church.

In case it may be thought that there is something novel in the idea that persons appointed by the Church to act on its behalf are entrusted with some measure of authority, it will be well to recall how Free Churchmen have regarded this matter in the past. For example, the distinguished Independent, Dr. John Owen, whose book *The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government* (1689) is a classic in this field, laid down that

"the rule of the Church is, in general, the exercise of the power or authority of Jesus Christ given unto it according unto the laws and directions prescribed by himself unto its edification. This power in *actu primo*, or fundamentally, is in the church itself; in *actu secundo*, or its exercise, in them that are especially called thereunto."

Owen draws a sharp contrast between what he calls a "ministry

unto edification” and the “usurpation of a dominion over the persons and consciences of the disciples of Christ”. The latter, he says, always involves “coercive jurisdiction” and “exaltation above others”. The basic principle is that

“there is no rule of the church but what is ministerial, consisting in an authoritative declaration and application of the commands and will of Christ unto the souls of men, wherein those who exercise it are servants unto the church for its edification for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4⁵).”

The minister of the Abingdon Baptist Church, the Rev. Daniel Turner, in his *Compendium of Social Religion* (1778) held it to be one of the duties which church-members owe to their ministers

“cordially to receive and submit to their administrations in doctrine and discipline, so far as is consistent with true Christian liberty, and the due preservation of the rights of conscience and private judgement.”

The ground for this exhortation is thus stated :

“Nothing can be more evident than that in every church rightly constituted, there must be (under Christ) some one at least appointed to rule; consequently the rest must be ruled. The rulers are such by office—to them pertains the regular execution *only* of the laws of Christ. And so far as their administration agrees with the Word of God, the rest are bound to obey (*Heb.* 13¹⁷)—though not to the prejudice of the rights of conscience and private judgement. For no church officer has any absolute, legislative or imposing power given him by Christ.”

This is strong language, drawing, as it does, upon a vocabulary which is strange to modern ears. Yet it will be observed how carefully it is guarded, and how firmly both writers repudiate any arbitrary exercise of power in the Church. The authority which both have in mind is not “magisterial” but “ministerial”; that is to say, it carries with it no power of coercion, but is based solely upon the sovereignty of Christ over His people. And although, in a democratic age, such ideas are not popular, we shall do well to ask ourselves whether some of the weaknesses of our Baptist life today may not be traceable to a too facile acceptance of secular assumptions which have little support from the Word of God.

Be that as it may, there is reason for thinking that a fresh examination of the place and purpose of authority in relation to the Church and its ministry is overdue. Among many of the younger

men in our Baptist ministry today there is no little uneasiness about their standing as ministers of Jesus Christ. Until fairly recently, a minister who had been invited by a Baptist church to become its pastor and had been publicly and solemnly "recognized" by his people, was able to exercise his ministry in complete confidence that his commission was from God as well as from the Church. He felt entitled to regard himself, and to be regarded by others, as a minister of Jesus Christ set apart for service in His Church. It is very doubtful, however, whether this holds good to the same extent today. For one thing, there is now in existence the Baptist Union "Accredited List". And although the Union expressly acknowledges that "others whose names do not appear on the List may rightly be designated Baptist ministers",¹⁰ the fact remains that a distinction is officially drawn between ministers who are "accredited" and those who are not. Nor is that the real difficulty. What the present generation of candidates for the ministry is increasingly asking is that a minister shall not merely be recognized as the pastor of a local Baptist church but also be commissioned in some way by the Whole Church acting in the Name of Jesus Christ. And this request raises issues which are, in two respects, of quite crucial importance for Baptists.

First, it is not too much to say that the future of the Baptist ministry is at stake. For, as the pressures of various kinds upon the ministry today grow heavier, it is likely to become increasingly difficult for men to resist invitations to alternative forms of Christian service unless the Church can in some way reinforce their sense of vocation. In the last resort, what makes and keeps a man a minister is his call from God. But it is often through the voice of the Church that men find God speaking to them most clearly. And the ultimate question for not a few ministers today is not whether the ministry is well or ill paid, but whether, in view of the way in which the ministry and its work seem often to be regarded, a man can still believe that, notwithstanding all the discouragements of his calling, he is where God would have him be.

The future of the local church is at stake, too. The *Statement on the Doctrine of the Church* issued by the Baptist Union in 1948 declared:

"It is in membership of a local church in one place that the fellowship of the one holy catholic Church becomes significant To worship and serve in such a local Christian community is, for Baptists, of the essence of Churchmanship."

This emphasis upon the local church has always been characteristic of Baptists, and it has enriched our history with some of its finest

¹⁰ *The Baptist Handbook*, 1959, p. 62.

examples of sacrificial devotion and loyalty to the Cause of Jesus Christ. In the local church, as P. T. Forsyth used to say, the Whole Church becomes visible. As a Fellowship of the Spirit, the local church is a standing protest against all barren institutionalism; and its place in the pattern of Christian churchmanship is the more vital today because of the steady drift of modern life in the direction of mass-organization and standardization. But the question which many of our laymen and ministers are now asking is, whether faith in the local church is enough. It is not merely that the greatly enlarged scale of life today puts in question the competence of a small and often isolated group adequately to represent and promote the Christian Faith in the modern world. The Baptist Union has already answered that question, in principle, by the establishment of the Sustentation Scheme and the Superintendency. The real problem is whether the actions of the local church, whether in ordaining its minister or in any other significant decision, can be taken to be acts of the Whole Church unless they are based upon a relationship with its sister-churches which is capable of mediating the judgement of the Whole. That is not primarily a practical question but a theological one, and so may be regarded by some people as relatively unimportant. Yet in all probability it is upon the answer to that question that the future pattern of our Baptist life will ultimately depend. And it is high time that we began thinking about it.

The moral of all this is, that authority is not something to be feared and distrusted, but rather to be understood and used in the service of the Gospel. For it is the condition upon which alone men are set free to act together in society. Without it, there can only be either tyranny or chaos; and in neither of these states can we permanently live and be happy. Authority in the Church witnesses to the fact that the Church is not a mere collection of individuals loosely linked to one another, but is a society of persons inescapably bound together in mutual love by their common dependence upon Jesus Christ, and their responsibility to Him as the Lord of life. And it is His decision and not our desires which must finally determine the part which any of us is called upon to play in the intricate texture of Church life. The Christian who is always grasping at power—be he deacon or choir-master or lay-preacher or what not—will be a perpetual source of frustration and distress both to himself and to his fellow-members, because he is seeking to do what, as a servant of Christ, he ought not. The minister who uses his authority to serve his personal ends is abusing it, for he is arrogating to himself a freedom which does not belong to him as the servant of Christ. The Church which does not honour and support its officers to the utmost of its power is stultifying itself

and dishonouring its Master, for it is undermining the relationship which binds the whole body to the One who is the only source of its power. But let minister, church-officers and members encourage each other in brotherly love and willing obedience to Christ, and the authority which binds them to one another and to Him will have the character which He Himself ascribed to it when He said: "My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

To sum up: the minister in the local church bears a dual responsibility under God because of the office which he holds. In the first place, as one called to leadership, it is his privilege and duty to set an example to his people, and to interpret by his own life and actions the gospel of the Grace of God. He is to be the "parson" or "persona" who gathers up and embodies, as it were the spiritual aspirations and activities of the community under his care. Finally, he is also to help his people by relating their corporate ministry to that of the Universal Church to which every local church belongs. The more emphasis we place upon the responsibility of the local church to direct its own life, the more necessary is it for us to be reminded that, in Christ, we are all members of a life that knows no frontiers, and that claims from us all a love and service to which no limits can be set. To the minister, more than to anyone else, is committed the task of becoming the channel through which the life of his people is kept in touch with and refreshed by those currents of the Spirit which sustain and renew the Whole Church of God to the praise and glory of His Name. "The ultimate aim of the Christian minister, after all, is to produce the love which springs from a pure heart, a good conscience and a genuine faith" (1 *Tim.* 1⁵).¹¹

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¹¹ J. B. Phillips's translation.