

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 RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH TO ITS MEMBERS. TEACHING AND DISCIPLINE.

By the Rev. Canon R. F. PEARCE, M.A.,

Vicar of Rodmersham.

I WOULD like to deal separately with the two parts of this subject, and to consider first the responsibility of the Church for teaching. Teaching is essentially the work of an individual ; it is the personal effort of one mind to guide and mould the thoughts of others. Teaching is given, not by Committees and Councils, but by individual men and women. So the responsibility of the Church in this matter really means the responsibility of individual members of the Church. Which members are responsible ?

On the one hand, every Christian is under a moral obligation to teach the truth which has been revealed to him. This is one of the principles of that new life with which the believer is endowed when he is born again. He must pass on to others the light which he has received. "Freely ye have received, freely give." It follows that the senior and more advanced members of the Church are responsible for teaching beginners the faith which they themselves have learned. This principle is clearly laid down in our Prayer-book : at every baptism of an infant, god-parents are told, "It is your parts and duties to see that this infant be taught." If only each ordinary member of the Church would pass on to his children and those under his charge the divine knowledge which he has received, there would be a solid foundation of Christian belief and thought throughout the community. This foundation has to be laid in the home by ordinary people speaking to those with whom they are most intimate. Children will absorb ideas from their parents and guardians much more readily than from any outside teacher. Unhappily such a foundation of thought does not exist to-day ; and the chief reason is that most of the members of our Church do not recognize their responsibility in this matter, and make no effort to teach others what they have learned of Christ. A few weeks ago, the Headmaster of a public school declared as the result of careful investigation, that more than half his pupils came from homes where no attempt was made to give any religious teaching at all. If this is the case even among the more educated and privileged classes, there can be no doubt that conditions are worse in poorer and less favoured homes.

On the other hand, while a general obligation to teach rests upon all Christians, there is certainly a much greater responsibility resting

upon the clergy, who have special gifts, a special commission, and special opportunities for this work. Scripture teaches us that teaching is inseparable from pastoral responsibility. In describing the various forms of ministry in the Church, St. Paul says "He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph. iv. 11). The same class of ministers are both pastors and teachers; those who have pastoral responsibilities are expected also to teach, and receive spiritual gifts for both these duties. In accordance with this, in our Church, a special commission and special opportunities both for pastoral work and teaching, are given to the same persons. Every one ordained to the priesthood is given a pastoral charge, and is also required to promise that he will instruct the people committed to his charge. He is commanded to dispense the word of God, and is required to promise that he will be diligent in reading the Scriptures; and he is provided with a salary which relieves him of the need of earning his living by other occupations. Thus the Church of England makes teaching an essential part of the work of all clergy. We hear a suggestion sometimes that the pulpit has too prominent a place in our churches; some people would like to put it away in a corner, and some to remove it altogether. But the pulpit is the place from which the pastor teaches his flock; and if teaching be one of his most essential and primary duties, the pulpit is one of the most necessary pieces of furniture in the Church.

What must the clergy teach? Our Lord said in His last commission "Teach them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you." Some have thought that these words merely instruct us to teach the regular observance of certain ordinances. But the meaning of Our Lord's commission cannot be confined within such narrow limits; it covers the whole range of His recorded words. We are to teach men to do all that He commanded, beginning with His first exhortation to "Repent." This was how His Apostles understood this injunction. St. Paul, in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, tells us how he tried to carry out Our Lord's commission. "I have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying, both to the Jews and to the Gentiles, repentance towards God, and faith towards Our Lord Jesus Christ." Repentance and faith were the basis of his teaching; but it was not confined to these subjects; he led his hearers on into deep spiritual truths, and opened out to them the promises of God. "I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God." His responsibility included the teaching of all these things.

Our Church shows us how we are to fulfil our Lord's commission. It calls upon us clergy to promise that we will instruct those committed to our charge from *the Scriptures*. In them is revealed the whole counsel of God: in them we have an abundant store from which to draw the subject-matter of our teaching. I very much fear that many clergy in England do not draw their teaching from the Bible. On my return from India, two years ago, I spent a year in this country without any spiritual charge of my own, and visited many Churches, and heard many discourses. I regret to say that very few

of these were based on the teaching of the Bible, and many were directly opposed to its plain statements. I have heard clergy preface their sermons with the words, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," and then proceed to give their own ideas without any reference to the teaching of the Bible. Surely this is taking the name of God in vain. I stayed a long time in one populous area, in which there were many churches, but not one where the Bible was clearly and definitely taught, and I am told that many populous districts in England are in the same unhappy condition. What is the use of recalling the people of England to religion, if, when they return to their Churches, they cannot hear the word of God? Our Lord has taught us that "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." The word of God is the Christian's spiritual food; our task is to feed the flock of Christ on that food. Those clergy who feed their congregations on modern thought or psychology or their own fancies, instead of on the Scriptures, are giving them stones for bread. We are under a threefold obligation to teach our fellow-Christians from the Bible: we have been commissioned to do so, we have promised to do so, and they need it.

But, while the range of our teaching is as wide as the whole Bible, there are certain truths which we have to take as the foundation and backbone of our instruction. These truths, which are clearly taught in Scripture, are officially handed down to us as the main doctrines of the Christian faith, together forming one consistent whole. We have a special responsibility for upholding and proclaiming this scheme of truth. St. Paul, in his first epistle to Timothy, refers to a body of truth, which he calls "the glorious gospel of the blessed God," and says it was committed to his trust. He adds, "This charge I commit to thee, son Timothy," and twice later in his epistles to this disciple he says "Guard that which is committed to thy trust." Besides guarding and preserving the truths committed to him, Timothy is also urged to teach them. Eight times in the Pastoral Epistles does St. Paul emphasize the importance of teaching "sound doctrine." This is defined as being "The words of our Lord Jesus Christ," and is said to be embodied in a model or form which Timothy learned of St. Paul. All these exhortations together show us that, having learned and accepted a scheme of Christian doctrine as being true and according to the word of God, we are under an obligation to guard it, to prevent it being abandoned or perverted, and to teach others the truths which it contains. We have received such a deposit of truth in the 39 Articles, to which each one of us clergy has given his assent. We have publicly declared these to be agreeable to the word of God, and we are responsible for upholding and teaching the doctrine contained in them. Our reasons for doing so are the same as those which Timothy had for maintaining the doctrines committed to him. We have learned these things; we have accepted them as assured truth, on competent authority; and we are satisfied that they are based on the teaching of Scripture. "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned, and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them;

and that from a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation " (2 Tim. iii. 14, 15).

It is obvious that even in St. Paul's day there was a danger of the Christian teacher losing his grip of the vital truths committed to him to teach ; he had to be warned to hold them fast. That danger is as great to-day. Many of the most fundamental doctrines of our faith are now doubted, disputed, or travestied, even by those called Christians. The atmosphere is full of new ideas ; orthodoxy is unpopular ; and there is constant pressure on the Christian teacher to turn aside from the well-worn path of revealed truth which has been trodden by those before him. He needs to be exhorted to hold fast the form of sound words which he has learned. No doubt it would be much more gratifying to our pride if we could discover for ourselves some new idea bearing on the problems of life, or produce out of our own thought or experience some new aspect of truth. Many clergy try to do this ; they think that it will arouse interest and attract attention, more than repeating the same doctrines which others have preached before. But we must do what we have been commissioned to do ; certain truths have been revealed by God as the way of salvation for men ; they have been committed to us, and we have accepted them by faith. Our supreme task now is to teach these truths, and to preserve them from being abandoned or perverted.

Let us now consider the responsibility of the Church for discipline, which I take to mean enforcing the observance of law. It is the duty of the Church as a body to uphold the moral law in the conduct of its members, and the chief way of accomplishing this, suggested in the New Testament, lies in the proper treatment of persons found guilty of public offences or scandalous conduct. The duty of the Church to exercise discipline in such cases is based upon our Lord's words in John xx. 23, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." These words were spoken, not to the eleven apostles only, but to a mixed body of believers, representing the whole Church ; and they have been understood to mean that the Church as a whole is responsible for pronouncing judgement upon offenders, or for declaring them to be absolved. The most notable example of the carrying out of this responsibility, recorded in the New Testament, was in the case where a Christian was found guilty of immorality in the Corinthian Church. St. Paul claimed to judge this person, and he called on the other members of the local Church to join him in this judgement. The judgement is defined as "delivering such an one over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh." It is not known exactly what these words implied. They may have included the infliction of some bodily suffering or infirmity. We know that St. Paul was empowered on one occasion to inflict blindness on an offender, namely, on Elymas, the sorcerer, at Paphos. We have no evidence that any local Church by itself was ever able to impose penalties of this sort. We must suppose that St. Paul was given power to do so as an Apostle ; but he called upon the Corinthian Christians to associate themselves with him in this act. He also told them of one thing which they could do themselves, namely,

withdraw from all contact with the offender. If all the members of a Church agree to ostracize any one of their number who has offended, they can, by that means alone, impose a severe penalty, and it may be effective in leading the sinner to realize his guilt. This is the kind of discipline which the Church as a body was required to exercise in the earliest days. Such united action of a local body of Christians is often practised among infant Churches in the mission field to-day, where there is a small community of baptized persons, socially dependent on each other, and cut off from the rest of the world. They can bring great pressure to bear on any one of their number by this penalty of social ostracism.

It would be impossible to organize any such united action here in the Church of England to-day. Our Church, being a National Church nominally embraces within its membership all baptized persons in England who have not definitely attached themselves to some other Christian body. As it is the custom for nearly everyone in England to be baptized and to call himself a Christian, our Church has millions of nominal adherents, holding many different beliefs, often no definite belief at all. It is not a select community cut off from the world; the world here is largely composed of people who are nominal members of the Church. Such people have only a superficial connection with the life of the Church, if any at all; they do not join regularly in its worship, nor understand its doctrines. But they are officially members, and there is no recognized line of distinction between those who are real, and those who are merely nominal members. Consequently any united action by members of the Church on a moral question is impossible.

Occasionally a Bishop excommunicates some person known to be guilty of immorality. But even such action is only taken on the rarest occasions, and there is never any general action taken by the Church against an offender. The newspapers daily report outrageous cases of immoral conduct by persons bearing English names, and therefore presumably baptized members of the Church. But we never hear of any judgement passed on them by a Bishop or Council, or Church Assembly. We are so far removed from the primitive idea of discipline by the whole Church, that any such united action by the Christian community of to-day seems unthinkable. I do not see how this kind of discipline can ever be practised, until the Church is separate from the world, and the members of the Church are united on fundamental principles. It is possible that there might be more frequent disciplinary action by the Bishops and clergy, according to the procedure laid down in the Prayer-book. But, as these instructions only refer to persons wishing to partake of the Holy Communion, the large majority of offenders are not concerned in them. Those who are not communicants and do not wish to be, are untouched by this sort of discipline.

There is, however, another sort of discipline, which can and ought to be maintained in the Church, not among the whole body of members, but among its officers, the Bishops and clergy, who are a comparatively small body of men, separated by their position from the

rest of the world, and bound by very definite rules in the conduct of their work. This discipline would consist in upholding the covenants under which these persons have entered on their respective offices. Every Bishop has promised to "correct and punish all who are unquiet, disobedient, or criminous, in his diocese, according to the authority he has by the word of God, and the ordinance of this realm." Every clergyman has promised to obey his Bishop in all things lawful, and to use the book of Common Prayer, and no other, in the services of the Church. Both have promised to drive away erroneous and strange doctrine, contrary to God's word, and have professed belief in the 39 Articles as agreeable to the word of God, thereby accepting a standard by which erroneous and strange doctrine can be judged. These promises form a Covenant, on the basis of which both Bishops and clergy have accepted their respective offices. If this Covenant is observed and these promises are kept, a system of discipline is thereby maintained. The authorities of the Church are responsible for maintaining discipline in this way. Unhappily it is very clear that they are not doing so. Many clergy use other forms of service than those in the Prayer-book. In some cases the Bishops do not use their authority to prevent this : in other cases they do forbid it, but are not obeyed, and the disobedient clergy are allowed to go their own way. Doctrine contrary to the 39 Articles is taught in sermons and lectures, in books, and in ceremonies and ritual bearing a symbolic meaning ; but in hardly any case have the authorities of the Church made any effort to drive it away. The Bishops have disciplinary powers over the clergy, and also exercise a good deal of power through the use of patronage. But, to all outward appearances, this power is not being used to drive away false doctrine. We could quote instances of men who openly reject the authority of Scripture, being appointed lecturers in diocesan Colleges ; and of men who teach doctrine plainly repudiated in the Articles, being given charge of large and populous parishes. Many Bishops adopt the policy of perpetuating Anglo-Catholic teaching and ritual in Churches where it has once been introduced, even though the teaching is plainly opposed to the standards of the Church of England, and the ritual is admittedly contrary to the law. Some Bishops even seem to encourage the clergy to introduce these things where they have not been found before. The Covenant has been broken on all sides, and discipline has vanished. When we see discipline so completely abandoned among the officers of the Church, we cannot be surprised that it is impossible to maintain it among the general body of members.

I wish to add that the whole subject of the responsibility of the Church for teaching and discipline may be treated from another angle, namely, in reference to the education of the young, in which both teaching and discipline are included. But I have not attempted to touch on this aspect of the subject in the short compass of the present paper.