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Parson, Parish and People

APPOINTMENTS TO BENEFICES IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
A STUDY PREPARED BY A GROUP WORKING UNDER THE CHAIRMANSHIP
OF M. H. MCQUEEN

Marcham Manor Press 132 pages 22s. 6d.

1. Eric James

AS myself a member of the Commission on the Deployment and Payment of the Ministry it was impossible for me to come to this book unbiassed; but I must ask my readers to believe that I have made a special and sincere attempt to be as unbiassed as I could be.

I make this preliminary statement because I must immediately add that after very carefully reading the book I found myself utterly dismayed. It was clear to me that the work of the authors is founded on a very different experience from mine. They seem not to know—or, if they know, not to wear on their pulses, on their hearts and minds—the pastoral realities of the situation of the Church of England as I have come to know them. Yet I remember as a child the Revd. V. N. Cooper at neighbouring St. Mary's, Becontree, and the Revd. Timothy Dudley-Smith was from 1953/1955 Head of the Cambridge University Mission to Bermondsey, and Canon Mohan worked in Islington from 1923/1932—to say nothing of the rich experience which must be theirs through the CPAS. So I am not only dismayed: I am deeply puzzled.

I can only say that before I began to review *in detail Parson, Parish and Patron* I would want to be sure that readers were themselves aware of the pastoral realities. I wish therefore I could simply walk every reader along the South Bank of the Thames for a number of Sunday mornings. We might start at Wandsworth and walk East through Battersea, Vauxhall, Lambeth, Blackfriars, Southwark, Bermondsey, Rotherhithe, Deptford, Greenwich, Woolwich and Plumstead. We might then walk a little further South and walk again from West to East—from Clapham Junction, through Clapham, Brixton, Stockwell, Kennington, Walworth, Camberwell, Peckham, New Cross, and Lewisham. I would want to stop at each church—about 150 of them, about a million parishioners in all,—and look at the social facts of each area surrounding each church, and the changes that have taken place and will take place in the foreseeable future through local planning and development. I would want to examine each church building (most of them large and at least a century old) and to look at the expenditure on keeping it and its services going, and to look at the life of the church—what goes on at the church and who uses it. Very often the congregation would be a tiny group of fairly aged people, a large number no longer parishioners but coming back from where they have now moved to, most of them a cut above the people of the neighbourhood. Many of the churches would only be keeping

open because of large subsidies from central or diocesan sources or by the vagaries of endowments in the past. I would want to look at what can no longer be ministered to on a purely parochial basis e.g. the secondary and comprehensive schools with a large catchment area etc. etc. After these walks on the South Bank I would want us to look at the same situation on the North Bank—involving here many more than a million parishioners. Then we would need to look at the centres of the other great concentrations of population—Liverpool, Birmingham, Leeds, Sheffield, Nottingham, Bristol, etc. We would also need to examine closely the statistics of population mobility—from country to town and from North to South. (Between 1951 and 1961 the increase of population in Southern England was five times what it was in the North, and each year the population continues to increase by well over a quarter of a million). We should also need to examine the factors—financial and otherwise—which produce the distressing situation that whilst only a tenth of the people now live in the country, half of the clergy still live there: that in fact the clergy are where the people aren't.

After this close look at the pastoral realities—and only after this—would I want everyone to ask themselves the question: 'Does the benefice system as we have it now need only minor revision where the major centres of population are concerned?' And I have no doubt at all that the vast majority of sincere intelligent Christians—whatever their churchmanship—would be bound to answer 'No!' Let there be no mistake: the debate on all this is not between Evangelicals and others. It cuts completely across churchmanship. It is between those who think that evangelism of this urban technological world only needs minor evolutionary reforms, and those whose experience leads them to believe that something more like a revolution is required. It is because I am desperately concerned with the evangelism of the areas of dense population that I judge *Parson, Parish and Patron* to be the work of good, kind and sincere people (I had the privilege of Mr. McQueen's friendship on the Commission until he was not re-elected to the Church Assembly) whose judgments are a world away from the pastoral realities and necessities of today. I am, as I say, utterly dismayed by this, but I ought not to be all that surprised; for it is possible even for bishops who have once served in these areas (which are not 'problem' areas, but areas more typical than exceptional) to speak and write as though they had had a complete mental blackout as to the realities of the dense areas of population.

In other words, I judge the method and approach of *Parson, Parish and Patron* to be *fundamentally* mistaken. It was indispensable to have first a sociological analysis of the situation. (I yearned for the approach of that magnificent Report of the Evangelical Alliance's Commission on Evangelism, *On the Other Side*, which begins with the Report of the Sociological Group. On page 36 of the Report it says: 'Instead of demarcating parish boundaries in spatial patterns, the frontiers should be invisible and flexible.')

The sociological analysis of the situation by writers really in touch with the pastoral realities would have been followed not by the evidence of Scripture related primarily to the system of appointment of ministers

as we have it, but to what the Bible says about the world which has been sociologically described, and what it says about the Shape of the Ministry to such a world. Of course, the Bible contains no blueprint for the Ministry to our world, for the world of the Bible—even the city world of the Bible—is overwhelmingly a static, agricultural world of settled, relatively small communities. The approach of the authors of *Parson, Parish and Patron*—to see what the Bible has to say merely about appointment to local ministry as it then was and then as we now have it—I found therefore a tragic misunderstanding of what is really required. I longed to receive from them a vision of the Shape of the Ministry to the world of today—preaching, teaching, communicating and interpreting the Gospel to our kind of world, pastoral care, the ministry of the sacraments, and the ordering of worship in our kind of society, the building up of the Body of Christ in locality *as it is today*. The Benefice was a marvellous form of ministry to *locality as it was in a static society*. To cleave to the benefice as we know it is faithless and unbiblical and unevangelical. Because we believe in the Lordship of Christ we dare not believe in ‘the benefice’ as so fundamental to the Shape of the Ministry.

I hasten to say that—with G. K. Chesterton—I believe that ‘for anything to be real it must be local’. The vital question before the Church at the moment is what form it should take at the different levels of locality. The assumption until recently has been that each small parish needed a full-scale church building, lighted and heated, with an organist, vergers, etc., a full-time staff, housing for the staff, a parish magazine, and a wide range of ministry to all ages based on the church’s premises. What we need surely is to look carefully at the various levels of locality e.g.

(a) the very small neighbourhoods, often not much more than a few streets and a shop or two, or, increasingly, the large block of flats, the ‘verticle receptacle’. This will have most reality for people of limited mobility—especially the very young and the very old

(b) the wider ‘natural grouping’ or locality, which may be the newly built estate

(c) the major centres of population composed of a series of ‘natural groupings’

(d) the Borough, which is sometimes synonymous with the major centre but sometimes embraces a series of major centres.

When we have seen how society is shaped we can begin to decide where we need our churches, what form they need to take, what full-time ministry, what *type* of full-time ministry, what specialists, who shall minister to an immediate locality, who shall have a wider area, where they shall be housed. The benefice as we have it too often assumes the very small neighbourhood as the all-sufficient ministry—with the church where it happened to be placed a century ago. Because there is a church and a vicarage, *in practice* that dictates the shape of the ministry and expenditure on it. But in the areas of dense population the church will probably have continued to fail to make the working-classes regular church-goers (the undoubted intention with which most inner-city churches were built); the middle-classes will have

continued to move away (and where they return they reveal the falling away of the middle-classes from church-going in the last half-century). Much of the social work once based on the churches will now be provided by the social services. The Church will no longer be the cultural centre for many that it was. And, as we have said, much will now operate (e.g. the secondary and comprehensive schools) on a wider basis than the very small neighbourhood. In addition—an important point—stewardship has taught us that we dare not use what money is available to us without real regard for Christian priorities and the needs of the world. The benefice however encourages financial isolationism. Two adjacent parishes, the churches five minutes walk away from each other, (I have a number of such in mind), may be in quite different circumstances because of differences of income—itsself due to the different social construction of the congregation, itself due to the different social construction of the neighbourhood, which has in turn resulted in not only a different size of congregation but different endowments, and cumulatively these have resulted in the ability to finance a larger full-time staff. So one adjacent church in a locality may be strong and the other weak, and there may be little sense of mission and ministry to the whole locality not least because the benefice system has so encouraged parochialism. Mutual responsibility and interdependence must begin at home!

It is, I believe, very urgent to relate the Shape of the Ministry to *locality as it is*. The authors of *Parson, Parish and Patron* make much of the great reduction in the total number of available *livings* over the past ten years; but they seem quite unaware of the movement on the part of those ordained not out of pastoral work but out of the kind of obligations and ministry the small benefice lays upon the ordained man. Of those ordained in 1960 31.4% were for various reasons no longer serving in full-time parochial work by 1967. (The figure for 1961 is 33.7% and for 1962, 33.3%). A report from Yale Divinity School U.S.A. indicates that only 17.6% of its first-year students this year plan to become ministers of local churches. I do not—from my own meeting with ordinands in England and America—believe there is any decline in the desire to minister pastorally in the Name of Christ. But I wish there had been some evidence that the authors of *Parson, Parish and Patron* were aware of all this—were aware that it is not merely a Commission that is calling for a new Shape of the Ministry. The Shape of Society is calling for a new Shape of the Ministry to serve and penetrate it. And there is evidence that men are hearing the call of God to this new shape of Ministry and answering it. (I note, for instance, that David Sheppard's great ministry at the Mayflower has sprung up locally but not from the local *benefice* with all its obligations).

I was invited to write a review of *Parson, Parish and Patron* of 2,000 words. I have decided, after much thought, to use all my allowed words on discussing 'the prior questions', which it seems to me the authors have either not been aware of, or have failed to face. In my judgment it is of the utmost importance that before we get down to discussing the details of Diocesan Ministry Committees etc. it is

essential that we should face these 'prior questions'. Am I wrong in thinking that it is amongst *Evangelicals* that I should most expect to find a realisation of the *fundamental* importance of and a passion for discussing (and more than discussing) *these* questions? Of course, as a member of the Commission (though this Review is only my own personal opinion) I am willing to discuss in detail Ministry Committees, etc. But the 'prior questions' are, I believe, the hinge on which the whole Report turns. That these receive no attention whatsoever in what purports to be a Study by *Evangelicals* I find dismaying. *On the Other Side* gave me hope that *Evangelicals* were coming to grips with Britain today. *Parson, Parish and Patron* dismayed me beyond words, because it is clear that some important and influential *Evangelicals* are still *passing by on the other side* of the pastoral realities of society as it is today.

2. F. J. Taylor

THE appearance of a book whose purpose in the words of the introduction 'is to make a positive contribution to the present debate in the Church of England on the appointment of ministers' ought to be welcomed. The volume entitled *Parson, Parish and Patron* is published as the first of a series of *Latimer House Papers* and is the work of a group under the chairmanship of M. H. McQueen. Inspection of the membership of this group discloses the fact that most of them have been or still are closely connected with the exercise of patronage in the church. This may well suggest to the considering reader that the compilers, though naturally drawn to a favourable view, with some suggested amendments, of patronage as it now is, do at least know at first hand what they are talking about. An impressive list of persons has been added whom the compilers have consulted in the production of this work. Patronage is one of those words which easily raises the temperature of any assembly, large or small, where it is mentioned and frequently elicits statements which are at once misleading and inaccurate. The word stands for the various and complicated methods by which incumbents are appointed to their benefices. It is an institution which has its origin in the earliest antiquity of the nation, bringing together spiritual service and property rights. The words 'patron', 'patronage' and 'exercise of rights of patronage' carry with them, derived from history, overtones which are or may be offensive and have given rise to scandal. The solemn declaration against simony which every priest must make before he can be instituted to the spiritual charge of a parish is a humiliating and painful but necessary reminder of how easily material gain may be confused with spiritual obligation.

The authors of this book set for themselves terms of reference which indicate as well its contents as its limitations. These terms are defined under three heads:

1. to investigate the biblical principles involved in the appointment of ministers to local churches in the context of the situation in the Church of England today;

2. to review the existing patronage system and the main proposals being made to supersede it; and to make a theological and practical assessment of both;
3. to make such alternative proposals as may be necessary.

We begin then with the section on the evidence of scripture. The writers assert that in approaching any subject it is a good rule to begin from first principles. Unfortunately, such an assertion bears the aspect of a doctrinaire statement. There are areas of investigation where the formulation of first principles can lead to unpromising or even harmful results. The Church of England in the sixteenth century did not proceed on the basis of discovering first principles and then rebuilding its life on the basis of these principles. Indeed, its long, exhausting and even harsh controversy with the disciples of Geneva really turned on this point. Instead after a fashion more nearly Lutheran, attention was given to the English church as it was and such changes made in its formularies, its liturgy and its practice as were clearly repugnant to the witness of scripture or disallowed by the accepted traditions of the first four or five centuries. Later in the book under notice the sensible suggestion is made that if there is clear evidence of the need for change, this should take the form of modifications and of developments from the present system rather than its destruction and the erection of something entirely new in the life and history of the English church. This section on scripture is somewhat laboured since it has to be admitted that to the question, 'what has the Bible to say about the appointment of ministers?', the answer which immediately springs to mind is 'nothing at all'. The call of ministers and their appointment to particular charges really belongs to that period of the church's life after the apostolic age. Nevertheless, there are two matters which could have received much greater emphasis and have stood out more clearly in this section. The first is that which is exemplified in the appointment of the apostles and their special place in the church. It is a fair assumption that all subsequent ministers, whatever their status, were authorised to act in the name of the Lord and on behalf of his people by persons, whether apostolic or not, who were known in the church to possess this necessary power of authorisation. The ministry, whatever its structure, is a gift of God to the church and the appointment of ministers to particular charges ought to embody this principle of givenness. Secondly, from very early times and almost certainly from within the New Testament period there has existed within the Christian church what is sometimes called 'a professional ministry', that is ministers appointed to a life service and maintained at their work by an income which the church provides. The apostle was not afraid to declare that this arrangement had divine authority: 'Even so did the Lord ordain that they which proclaimed the gospel should live of the gospel.' The precedent of ancient Israel suggested (in due course) ways in which such a ministry might be organised and remunerated. It is well to recall that apparently even in these early days the material advantages attaching to spiritual office, which in no circumstances could have been great, brought into the ranks of the ministry some men whose motives were base and whose

behaviour was scandalous. Presbyters are warned against filthy lucre in St. Peter's First Letter and the same warning is addressed to 'bishops and deacons' in the pastoral epistles.

There follows a useful summary of the development of patronage down the centuries and of the rise of patronage trusts in England from the end of the eighteenth century through the energetic action of Charles Simeon. It is curious to find no mention in this section of Richard Sibbes, a seventeenth century Puritan who in his day tried to ensure the survival of Puritanism within the framework of the Church of England and in an environment which was distinctly unfavourable to his efforts. One of the most effective and yet least helpful of the products of that brilliant pamphleteer, Dr. Hensley Henson, Bishop of Durham, was entitled *Sibbes and Simeon*. The quotation from Simeon's trust deed was worth making and should be read, marked and learned by all who have anything to do with the making of appointments. It is important to note the facts cited in this chapter from the Morley Report. Appointments to about one third of the parishes of the country are made by the bishops; to about one fifth by private individuals, and it would not be improper to add that episcopal influence is very effective in this direction; about one seventh are made by patronage trusts and the rest by the crown, incumbents of mother churches, universities and colleges, deans and chapters and diocesan boards of patronage. Critics of the exercise of patronage as we now know it usually direct their hostility onto the patronage trusts. Fine rousing speeches can be made with the intention of raising such a disgust in the auditors that they may be persuaded with one grand gesture to sweep away the whole thing. Yet on these figures and by the clear admission of the Morley Report, trustees, while never claiming to be infallible in their judgment, do discharge their trust and exercise their responsibilities with due regard as well for the parishes and their needs as for priests who are qualified to meet these needs. From time to time mistakes are made, and probably everyone who has ever given attention to this subject has his horror story, but let it be said unambiguously that the patronage trusts, all in all, have served the church well over the years. Moreover, the dispersal of patronage, that is of the rights of nomination, over so wide a number of people, though with a proper emphasis on the episcopate, avoids the overgreat concentration of power in any one direction. To substitute for this, the method of appointment by a diocesan ministry commission proposed by the Morley Report, would be not only a violent and unnecessary break with the traditions and customs of the church, but would also signal a deplorable form of committee centralisation.

The later part of the book considers and makes measured criticisms, which by now will be familiar to most of the readers of this journal, of this substitute proposed for the present system. The most valuable part of these pages is to be found in the section which expounds the comparison with systems followed elsewhere both in the Anglican communion and in non-episcopal churches. The extent to which the Morley Report was disingenuous on this point is underlined and should be noted. The statistical tables show that the source of discontent

often openly displayed in recent years is to be found in the reduction of the number of livings through schemes for union and suspensions of patronage, combined with the increased number of men now in the ministry through the improved level of ordinations in the five years from 1959. To put it crudely, too many men are chasing too few livings! That there are in some circumstances good arguments for the union or merging of parishes is undoubtedly true, but it seems likely that this process has been carried too far. Men do wish to have and do need to have, after a time, their own piece of work for which they are responsible to God and to their ecclesiastical superior. Among the concluding principles which the compilers see as implicit in all that they have written is named the maintenance of the independence of the clergy. It is very important for this to be safeguarded. It does not mean disregard of the bishop and the diocese, nor does it imply an indifference to or a failure to gain the cooperation of the congregation. It does signify the right of the parish parson to do his duty as he sees it in the circumstances in which he finds himself and a freedom, legally secured, from the curtailment of his ministry either in the interests of diocesan policy or in response to unworthy pressure from parishioners. This will involve, and it is a conclusion I entirely endorse, the preservation of the essentials of the parson's freehold. Other suggestions made in these pages of an earlier retirement age combined with an encouragement to spend the last working years as assistant ministers, of the keeping of a voluntary central register, of the requirement of consultation on the part of patrons with the bishop as well as with the parish, and of the possibility of changing patronage in a parish where undoubtedly failure in trust had occurred, are all practical suggestions which would be worth further examination and, if thought right, could be implemented within the present system.

It remains only to add that this is a useful work containing within its covers much useful information in an easily accessible form. Its arguments and suggestions merit careful examination.