

# The Ministry and the Sacraments.

A FREE CHURCH POINT OF VIEW.<sup>1</sup>

ANY discussion of the Free Church doctrine of the Ministry and the Sacraments must necessarily begin with something even more fundamental, namely our conception of the Church. For this purpose, I cannot do better than quote the definition given in *An Evangelical Free Church Catechism* which was originally published by the National Free Church Council in 1898 and re-issued unchanged in 1927 with an introduction by Dr. Scott Lidgett. The Committee originally responsible for this Catechism included such names as Professor Vernon Bartlet, Dr. Clifford, Professor Peake and Dr. Oswald Dykes.

To the question "What is the Holy Catholic Church?" the Free Church reply is: "It is that Holy Society of believers in Christ Jesus which He founded, of which He is the only Head, and in which He dwells by His Spirit; so that, though made up of many communions, organised in various modes, and scattered throughout the world, it is yet One in Him." The Catechism adds: "The essential mark of a true branch of the Catholic Church is the presence of Christ, through His indwelling Spirit, manifested in holy life and fellowship."

In other words, the Church is a fellowship of believers who are united to Jesus Christ in a personal relationship of trust and obedience, and are by that fact bound one to another by ties of mutual loyalty and love. Those ties sometimes take explicit shape in the fellowship of a particular local Church. At other times the bonds which unite fellow-Christians may remain almost wholly implicit and unexpressed. But the Church consists of all those, and only those, who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, irrespective of any other test whatsoever. And it is to all such, and not merely to a selected few, that the commission is given to go and teach all nations.

Further, every individual Church-member has the same right as any other of direct access to God in Jesus Christ; the same personal assurance of forgiveness and help; the same real, if limited, portion of responsibility for bringing his quota, with others, to the Master's service. And the members of a Church, assembled in a duly summoned Church-meeting, need no further authority than the promised presence of Christ to transact in the name of the Church all relevant business.

"We believe"—says the Baptist reply to Lambeth issued

<sup>1</sup> Paper read to the Friends of Reunion Conference, Haywards Heath, May 3rd, 1938.

in May, 1926—"that this Holy Society is truly to be found wherever companies of believers unite as Churches on the ground of a confession of personal faith. Every local community thus constituted is regarded by us as both enabled and responsible for self-government through His indwelling Spirit Who supplies wisdom, love and power and Who, as we believe, leads these communities to associate freely in wider organisations for fellowship and the propagation of the Gospel."

#### THE MINISTRY.

In our view, therefore, the *Ministry* of the Church is the ministry of the *Church*. That is, it is not in the first instance a body of men set apart—in however solemn a way—for a particular office, but it is the ministerial function (or rather group of functions) which the Church itself is responsible for discharging.

We see no reason to regard one form of Ministry as sacrosanct or indispensable. The Church furnishes itself with Ministers as the Spirit directs and the occasion requires. Permanent needs of Church life call for the appointment by the Church of persons who can give their whole time and attention to them. Other ministries may have a purely temporary character. But the principle remains the same. "God gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ." Within that general condition the Church is free, under the guidance of the Spirit, to modify or develop its ministries without limit. A Church may invite a fully-trained theological student to take the complete oversight of its work in a ministry which may last fifty years. It may equally call upon a wholly untrained layman (or, for that matter, woman) to preach a sermon, to conduct the Lord's Supper or to perform any other service whatsoever. Granted ability, the necessary qualifications are only two: (1) That the individual concerned shall have a sense of divine constraint leading him to the exercise of his gifts, and (2) that after the Church has satisfied itself as to his spiritual fitness, it shall invest him with the requisite authority to act on its behalf.

Herein lies the root, I think, of the Free Church difficulty about Episcopacy. Our objection is not to a supervising Ministry as such, for we already have it; nor is it to the use of due and orderly procedure in conveying to suitable persons the authority needful for their office. We use such procedure ourselves. What we repudiate is the idea that any procedure, however hallowed by tradition or elaborated by experience, should be elevated to a position of first-rate importance in the

life of the Church, and should be regarded as indispensable. Comparison is sometimes drawn between the position of an Anglican Bishop and that of a Congregational Moderator or a Baptist Superintendent on the ground that their functions are somewhat similar. In actual fact no real comparison is possible. Both Moderators and Superintendents have, it is true, gained an honoured—and, in practice, one might almost say an indispensable—place in the life of their respective denominations. Yet, in principle, their position rests wholly upon consent. Any particular church may elect to remain quite independent of them. Their abolition (however regrettable) might conceivably be resolved upon to-morrow without offending the conscience of a single individual in the Churches which they serve. (It is for Anglicans to say whether they could view the disappearance of the Episcopate with the same equanimity.)

Finally, the view of the Ministry which I have outlined carries with it for us this corollary, that no minister has any priestly function apart from that which inheres in the Church as a whole, and which every believer shares by virtue of his membership of the Church.

#### HOLY COMMUNION.

Turning now to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, it is noteworthy that its characteristic name amongst Free Churchmen is "The Lord's Supper." That is to say, both in name and (largely) in the actual form of the Service, we cherish the thought that this is the family meal of the Church, at which Jesus Himself is the Host. As such it is a festal occasion which—on the principle that "He that feasts every day feasts no day"—is the more valued because generally held at relatively rare intervals (once, or at most twice, a month). On these occasions it is customary for us, in addition to partaking of the Bread and the Wine, to engage in other acts which similarly symbolise and cement the fellowship of the Church. Thus, at our Communion Services, we welcome by name, and give the right hand of fellowship to, new Church-members. We announce such bereavements as the Church has suffered. We recall in prayer the absent and the sick. We invariably take up a special offering for the poor of the Church. Even the sitting posture in which we commonly receive Communion, and the position which the presiding Minister and his helpers take up at the Table, have their significance as recalling the scene in the Upper Room at the simple meal which Jesus shared with His disciples. The purpose of all this is to quicken in one another the consciousness of the Body of Christ as a spiritual fellowship at whose centre is the Holy Love which was incarnate in Jesus, and which is

symbolised by the Bread and the Wine which set forth His sacrificial death.

For this reason most Free Churchmen greatly deprecate restricting access to Communion upon grounds of Church order. This is the *Lord's Supper*, to which He invites all who love Him, and we who are Church-members see nothing contrary to His mind in asking any to join us who wish to respond to the Master's invitation. Rather we view it as an offence for which discourtesy is too weak a word, to refuse to any man or woman who sincerely desires it the privilege of coming to the Supper of the Lord.

The meaning given to the Sacrament varies somewhat among our people, but I think that, for the majority, it is chiefly a Service of Remembrance, which brings vividly before their minds the picture of Jesus at the moment when His love for men was most powerfully expressed. This is not to say that our Communion Service lacks mystical significance. Few of our people would attach any intelligible meaning to the idea that Jesus is present *in* the Bread and the Wine. Nor would they connect His presence either with the use of an unvarying order of service, or with the presidency of a full-time Minister. Nevertheless they do most firmly and devoutly believe in that Real Presence which is promised to the two or three who are gathered in the name of Christ, and they can testify to the reality of their communion with Him. "I have in my youth," says the writer of a typical Free Church article in the current *Congregational Quarterly*, "been present at a Communion Service conducted by a village blacksmith, a wise, single-minded, and gracious Christian, and felt the sense of the presence of Christ as nearly as when the feast had been spread by any other. There is no such thing as an invalid sacrament when two or three are gathered together in His name."

The essence of the matter is that we administer and participate in the Lord's Supper not as a solitary rite, but—as the name of "Ordinance" implies—as an expression of that worshipful obedience to the Master in all His commands through which alone communion with Him can be ethically and spiritually realised. At its deepest level, the believer's act of obedience becomes an act of self-surrender, in which he makes oblation of himself to God in the Spirit of Sonship and becomes united thereby with his crucified and risen Lord.

#### BAPTISM.

In the matter of Baptism, I am naturally bound to speak, not for Free Churchmen in general, but as representing the standpoint of the particular denomination to which I belong. Here

I confess I am at once in difficulty, for a very recent and thorough examination of the Baptist position by a Denominational Committee shows that Baptists themselves do not entirely agree as to the relation of baptism to Church order. The situation is too complex to be summarised briefly and I must refer those of you who are interested to the report (published in 1937) of the special Committee appointed by the Baptist Union Council to consider the question of union between Baptists, Congregationalists and Presbyterians. The view I shall try to state here is what I think would be recognised by Baptists as representing a very large body of our people.

First, it is a mistake to suppose that our distinctive convictions are concerned mainly with the amount of water which is used in the act of baptising. We do attach importance to immersion, partly as having been the New Testament mode, and also as symbolising more effectively than any other mode the character of the spiritual transaction involved. Immersion is, as a matter of fact, the mode invariably used among Baptists to-day. But the point we are concerned to stress is that Baptism should be administered only to candidates who are of an age to exercise that personal repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which are essential to the New Testament meaning of the Sacrament. Our repugnance to Infant Baptism is—needless to say—not based upon any antagonism to children; nor are we blind to the elements of value in a “Christening” Service. Our objection is, that the baptism of infants is an unscriptural practice which veils the essentially personal nature of the issue between the soul and God. Further, its symbolism tends to introduce into the Christian faith a body of ideas and associations which are foreign to the true character of Christianity. In contesting Infant Baptism—says Dr. Wheeler Robinson—“Baptists are testifying against much more than an isolated and relatively unimportant custom; they are testifying against the whole complex of ideas of which it was a symbol, out of which grew the conception of the Church as primarily a great sacramental institution, administered by a body of officials vested with spiritual powers in which ordinary Christians could not share.” (*The Life and Faith of the Baptists.*)

The Baptism of Believers which we practise (relying—as we believe—on New Testament authority for so doing) is in fact a different rite from Infant Baptism, and the Baptist interpretation of it is, broadly speaking, as follows:—

(1) Believers’ Baptism is the candidate’s personal testimony in action to his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It happens that my own practice in administering the rite is to ask the candidate publicly, while standing in the water, whether he accepts Jesus

Christ as Saviour and Lord, and, upon his assent, to immerse him forthwith in the name of the Trinity. But whether this procedure be used or not, the Service itself retains its original New Testament significance as a mode of voluntarily professing the Christian faith. In other words, it is a sign of Conversion, and not a means to it.

(2) The rite expresses for us, also, the moral and spiritual union of the believer with Jesus Christ in his repudiation of sin and his dedication to the service of God. In this connection the symbolism of Immersion has (as St. Paul pointed out in Romans vi.) a peculiar value, inasmuch as the descent of the candidate into the water, and his ascent therefrom, faithfully portray that new orientation of the soul which St. Paul described as dying to sin and rising to Christ.

(3) Experience proves that Believers' Baptism may be a baptism not merely of water but also of the Spirit of God—in other words, a Means of Grace. I say it may be such, for no human power can absolutely guarantee the presence in the candidate of that personal faith through which alone Divine Grace can be appropriated. But that such grace is given in answer to the prayers and faith of the candidate and of the Church is indubitable.

(4) The act of Believers' Baptism is closely linked in our Churches with the entrance of the candidate upon Church membership, although I should add that the connection is not a hard and fast one. For one thing, admission to membership in our Churches does not follow automatically from any rite, but is a privilege which can be accorded only by the decision of the Church itself. Secondly, we not infrequently baptise members of other Christian denominations who have become convinced that Believers' Baptism is the scriptural mode, and who seek it at our hands. Thirdly, an increasing number of our Churches would not reject an application for Church-membership on the sole ground that the applicant had not been baptised, provided that there was good reason to believe him to be a sincere follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. But with these qualifications, it is true to say that Baptism is the normal rite of initiation into the membership of a Baptist Church.

This very inadequate summary of Free Church views upon the Ministry and Sacraments will have completely failed if it has not made at least one thing clear, namely, that these views form a real unity. Free Church thought and practice are, in fact, rooted in one coherent spiritual principle, which is, the undivided sovereignty of the Living Christ over His people, with their consequent freedom and responsibility to interpret and apply His will as He makes it known to them. Freedom for us

is more than freedom from State control, important as that is. It is freedom also from any other kind of constraint, social or ecclesiastical, which would prevent the free response of Christ's people to the immediate direction of His Holy Spirit. "A Free Church"—says a recent writer—"is a Church in which Christ is free to determine the Church's spirit and character: free to express Himself in and through it: free to inspire it in new endeavours and achievements: free to embody Himself in it, that through it He may fulfil His glorious purpose in the soul of the race in His own way." (T. Edmunds, *Christian Freedom and Community*.)

I fear our practice as Free Churches falls lamentably short of our ideal; we never do succeed in living up to it perfectly. But it would be affectation to deny that this is what still gives to Free Church life such meaning and power as it possesses. And we are correspondingly obliged by all that we hold sacred to bear our witness to it.

The question many of us have to answer is whether such a conception of Church life as I have outlined is finally reconcilable with organic Church union as at present conceived. The two types of Church order represented, roughly, by the names "Catholic" and "Free Church" cannot surely, from any final point of view, be absolutely incompatible. They are both—we must believe—genuine, if imperfect, embodiments of the Faith we hold in common. We are learning, indeed, by experience, that at many points they do not so much contradict as supplement one another. Neither can do without the other, and both must learn more and more to co-operate in free and equal fellowship. But that very fact seems to some of us to suggest that the full contribution of these two types to the Church Universal may perhaps only be realised as we recognise that they *are* distinct types, and that their union must—at any rate, for the present—be in the nature of a federation rather than a fusion.

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