

The Christian Pastor.

IT has been recently remarked by a distinguished Church historian¹ that the figure of the Pastor is peculiar to the Christian religion. Other religions beside Christianity have had their priests and prophets, their teachers and holy men, but none of them—so it would seem—have produced “pastors” in the sense in which Christians understand the term. Apparently it is only the Christian Church which has provided itself—or, should we not rather say, has been divinely provided?—with a “shepherd of

The significance of this ought not to be underrated. Both the term “Pastor,” and the idea behind it, are thoroughly Biblical. The people of Israel are God’s flock, and His ministers are pastors or shepherds (Psalm c. 3, Jeremiah xxiii. 1). Jesus is the Good Shepherd (John x. 14), and, before His Ascension, He commits to His disciples the care of His sheep (John xxi. 15ff). Yet the New Testament has less to say about the pastor and his work than one could wish. The title occurs, in fact, only in the Epistle to the Ephesians in the list of those who have been given to the Church by its Head “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. iv. 11f). True, the Pastoral Epistles emphasise the qualities to be looked for in those set aside for the Christian ministry, and the care that must be exercised in the appointment of such. (Cf. 1 Tim. iii. 1-7, v. 22, Titus i. 5-9.) But of the actual duties of a pastor we learn little beyond what may be gleaned from the fact that he occupies a position of oversight, and that there is enjoined upon him the care and nurture of the Church of God (Acts xx. 28). Such meagre references do not carry us very far. We can see the figure of the pastor taking shape, so to say. But it is left to history and the providence of God to decide the place which he is eventually to occupy in the Christian community.

If, on the other hand, we ask what is expected of a pastor to-day, and what function he fulfils in the contemporary Christian Church, the answers we shall get will vary greatly according to the particular Christian denomination and ministry which we have in mind. In fact, it might seem at first sight as if there were not very much in common between (say) a French curé, an Anglican bishop, a Lutheran superintendent, and a Baptist minister. Yet in their different ways they are all “Pastors,” charged with the

¹ K. S. Latourette, “The Uniqueness of the Christian Ministry” in *International Review of Missions*, Vol. XXIV. (1935).

care of the flock of God. The name does actually indicate many common elements in their work, and it would appear that, if the pastor has come to occupy a unique position in Christendom, it is because he combines in himself, or rather in his functions, characteristics which the whole Church has found to be capable of wide extension, and possessing deep and enduring significance for mankind.

First among these characteristics, although not necessarily in order of importance, is that of leadership. The pastor's "charge" may take many forms. He may be the minister of a large city congregation with numerous organisations associated with it. Alternatively, his pastorate may consist of a small and remote country parish or congregation, or even—to take the term pastor in a more extended sense—of a diocese or province containing many such congregations or parishes. But the distinctive mark of the pastor is that he is called by God to be a leader in the Church of Christ. He has the oversight of a particular Christian community, and he is chiefly responsible for co-ordinating its activities, and for supplying that blend of foresight and initiative, of counsel and inspiration, which corporate life invariably needs if it is to thrive. The pastor's official and legal authority will vary very much according to the branch of the Church in which he serves. In some denominations it will be considerable, and in such cases we should have to speak not merely of leadership, but of rule. But in others (like the Baptist) it is very small. In all of them, however, the moral and spiritual authority wielded by the pastor who is a real leader can be far-reaching, and will not infrequently surpass that of any other individual in the community. No vocation calls in practice for the exercise of finer qualities of personal leadership than does the pastorate.

Further, the pastor is more than a leader; he is also an "interpreter," if I may so put it, and that in a double sense. In the first place, he represents his people before God in the act of public prayer. In the Church's worship, it is the pastor who is in great measure responsible, not only for the sermon, but also for the choice and order of the hymns, the Scripture, and the prayers, and, not least, for the administration of the Sacraments. It is largely through his voice that the needs of the people find utterance; and, in the degree to which he is able to interpret their unspoken thoughts and desires, he helps their prayers to become articulate in a way which for many of them would otherwise have been impossible. The pastor is an interpreter, too, in another and even higher sense, inasmuch as he stands before men as a spokesman and agent for God. His work as an evangelist and teacher is nothing if it be not the exposition and enforcement of truth which has first been sought from God. He is a "steward of the

mysteries of God" in word and in deed (1 Cor. iv. 1). The Gospel of which he is the servant is unchanging. But its message has to be freshly related to the changing circumstances and needs of men, and clothed in a language which they can understand. All this calls for disciplined thought and speech, and for interpretative insight, making great demands upon both character and ability. Moreover, to be effective, it must also normally be undertaken by one who stands, as the pastor does, in a relationship of special intimacy and responsibility with a particular congregation of people whom he is addressing regularly. This is not to depreciate the value of what may be called "occasional preaching," which, in its own time and place, is equally necessary with that of the stated ministry for the full proclamation of the Gospel. Yet such preaching should be understood as supplementing, and not replacing, the work of the pastor, whose peculiar responsibility towards his flock remains unchanged.

Finally, the true pastor watches over the welfare of his flock, both old and young, as their friend in the things of the Spirit. "It is in the conception of its function as the 'cure of souls'"—to quote Professor Latourette—"that the Christian ministry, whether it be Roman Catholic or Protestant, is unique." The pattern controlling the pastor in his charge is that of the Good Shepherd who sought the lost, and gave His life for His sheep. Nowhere do the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians apply with more force than they do to the pastor. "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity (love), I am become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal." The most effective work of the pastor is done not in the pulpit, nor on great public occasions, so much as in those experiences of joy and sorrow, of moral defeat and spiritual crisis, which bring him within the homes of his people, and make him one with them in the intimacies of family life and of personal friendship. In fine, the Christian pastor—be he Baptist, Methodist, Anglican or what not—is a father in God to his people, their "guide, philosopher and friend" in a far deeper sense than the stock phrase commonly suggests.

Can we draw any conclusions from this which will have relevance in particular to our Baptist life? I believe we can. The crux of the matter for us is that by its very usefulness (to say nothing of any higher reason) the pastorate has become an "Office" in the Church, and a very important office at that. Let us not on that account suppose that it is any the less a "vocation." The first condition required of a candidate for pastoral office must always be that he should have been led to seek it in obedience to an impulse which has come to him from God. His appointment is from above, though it is made through human agency. Nor need we conclude that the pastorate is necessarily a full-time office, or

one upon which he depends for his whole livelihood. Indeed, the contrary has often been—and not infrequently is still—the case in our Baptist story. The pastoral office is freely adaptable to circumstances, as the Spirit of God directs. And the pastor, whatever his gifts or qualifications, has no unique spiritual prerogatives, but is like every member of his flock in being burdened with infirmities and sins for which there is no remedy but the Grace of God. Nevertheless, when a particular Christian congregation has, in the name of God, chosen such an one as its leader, has accepted obligations towards him, has entrusted him with the oversight of its moral and spiritual welfare, and has placed its members, old and young, in his care, then the all too frequent remark that there is “no difference” between the pastor and the rest of his people is, to say the least, very wide of the truth. There is this palpable difference to begin with, that, whatever the pastor’s intrinsic merits, there has been laid upon him by the church in the name of God a representative responsibility which he and no other can discharge. Thenceforward he is a marked man. Trust is reposed in him; expectations are centred upon him. And, although there may come times when he will be tempted to divest himself of his representative character, and try to become once more merely an individual, he cannot yield to such a temptation except at the risk of being unfaithful to his charge in the sight of God. Further, function begets capacity, and the central position of the pastor in the Christian community opens to him fields of usefulness which are not accessible to others. The work of a Baptist pastor reproduces, strangely enough, with remarkable fidelity under modern conditions, characteristics which link it with both the prophetic and the priestly office of Old Testament times. Like the prophet and the priest, the pastor occupies a representative position in relation to the people of God, and acts as a medium of intercourse between them and God. That the pastor exercises a prophetic ministry has indeed long been recognised in Protestantism, and has not infrequently been claimed as one of the chief differentiae of Protestant thought and worship. Hence the importance we rightly attach to the preaching of the Word as a divine revelation. But what has been said above about a pastor’s work makes it plain that he is also charged in the exercise of his calling with some of the functions of a priest. To be sure, his is not a sacerdotal ministry in the commonly accepted sense of the term. It is his privilege, not to offer sacrifices, but to point men to the one perfect sacrifice of Christ. And, in so far as his hearers personally appropriate in penitence and faith the benefits of Christ’s work, they become their own priests, and need no other mediator through whom to approach God than the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet it is none the less true that, as the members of a

Christian congregation look spontaneously to their pastor, both publicly and privately, for sympathy and help in the offering of prayer, they implicitly recognise in so doing that he exercises a representative ministry on their behalf before God. Such a loving ministry of prayer and intercession as a pastor is constantly being called upon to fulfil for his people is indeed an exercise of priestly function worthy to be set alongside the ministry of the Word. It conflicts in no way with that "priesthood" which all believers enjoy (cf. 1 Peter ii. 5), and there seems no good reason why we should hesitate to say that whereas, when the pastor is interpreting God's will to men, he speaks as God's prophet, so on the other hand when he is interpreting the needs of men in the presence of God, he speaks as their priest. May it not be precisely this union of the prophet and the priest in the pastor which best accounts for the importance of the latter in non-sacerdotal as well as sacerdotal churches?

A minor point is, whether occupancy of the pastoral office should be indicated by the wearing of any distinctive dress. Older generations of Baptist ministers certainly thought so, and were commonly recognisable by such marks as a frock-coat or a white tie. Of recent years, the custom has lapsed, and a convention of a different sort has grown up in its place. But what is probably a sound instinct is now—after a period of indifference—leading many younger Baptist ministers to adopt some form of distinctive clerical attire. The logic of the development is, indeed, not hard to understand. Granted that the pastorate is an office in the Church, carrying with it the responsibility of leadership, then, in spite of possible disadvantages on other counts, it would certainly seem desirable that occupants of that office should be so attired, as, on the one hand, to emphasise the subordination of their individuality to their work, and, on the other, to leave no one in doubt—at any rate on public occasions—regarding the nature of their calling.

Such considerations prompt the reflection that a man called to the pastoral office should be commissioned for his ministry in the most solemn and representative way open to us to devise. An "Ordination Service" does not—in Baptist thought—confer the grace of "Orders" upon the ordinand. But it is not on that account either superfluous or meaningless. If leadership in the Church be indeed, as the New Testament clearly states, of Christ's appointing (Ephes. iv. 11), then it is plain, first, that no man ought to be allowed to enter upon it for purely personal reasons; and secondly, that the Church ought to set apart those called to undertake the duties of the pastorate in such a fashion as will both signalise the ground of their vocation in God, and bring to them the gift of His Spirit. How and by whom that should be under-

taken—whether, for example, by the laying-on of the hands of brother-ministers and others, or by the giving of the right hand of fellowship by a College Principal, or by the prayers of the Baptist Union Assembly, or in other ways—will be a matter for discussion. But the method of doing it is of less importance than that it should be done, and so done that the true significance of the pastoral office is maintained and emphasised.

All this points to the need to-day for a deeper appreciation by our Baptist people of the meaning of the pastoral office, and of its great importance for the healthy life of our churches. I suggest that this may best be brought about in two ways. First, by emphasising the responsible character of the pastor's vocation, and the imperative need both for seeking out the best candidates, and for giving them the best training we can for their future work. Two quotations will illustrate this. The first relates to the Anglican priesthood, but it applies equally well to the office of the pastor: "To bear the weight of the priesthood a man must either be born great or become great: a vulgar heart, a feeble character, a grovelling mind, an imperfect education will not come up to the mark. In this day our people require something more of their clergy, and they are right."² The second quotation is from words which Robert Hall wrote for the prospectus of Stepney College, and which are as pertinent now as they were in 1810 when they were first written: "Never was there a time when books were so multiplied, knowledge so diffused, and when consequently the exercise of cultivated talents in all departments was in such demand. When the general level of mental improvement is so much raised, it becomes necessary for the teachers of religion to possess their full share of these advantages, if they would secure from neglect the exercise of a function, the most important to the interests of mankind." This is not to say that even a highly-trained ministry will ever be able to cover the whole field of the Church's need. The more decisively the pastor is set apart and trained for a specialised office in the Church, so much the more room will there be for the contributions of other members of the Church, both men and women. It is they who may commonly be trusted to provide an experience of affairs which the pastor often lacks, and it is they, too, who out of their daily contact with the common life of men can bear testimony to the power of Christ to elevate that life and hallow it. Their gifts, no less than their pastor's, may become a "manifestation of the Spirit" (Romans xii. 4). Nevertheless, it remains true that the office which the pastor occupies exposes him to demands and responsibilities which his people can, in the nature of things, only partially share. It follows, therefore, that the more we desire our pastors to take their full place

² Quoted by Bede Frost, *Priesthood and Prayer*, p. 86.

amongst men as servants of God, bringing to bear upon the changing needs of life a judgment and a spirit clarified and inspired by the Lord Jesus Christ, so much the more must we determine to spare no pains in giving them the best preparation and training we can. Nor should we shrink from the duty—distasteful though it be—of discouraging the appointment to pastoral office of men who lack the necessary qualifications for it.

Finally, we need a revived consciousness of the sacredness of the pastoral office, and of the relationship which binds pastor and people together. One of the noteworthy features of our Baptist life during the past thirty years has been the successive attempts made by the Baptist denomination to improve the status of its accredited ministers, and to give to them in various ways practical encouragement and help. Not to recognise this with warm appreciation would be both unjust and ungenerous. Yet it ought also to be said frankly that such improvements in the position of ministers will have been won at too great a cost if their result is to encourage either pastors or people to view their mutual relationship as, in effect, little more than a business contract. Higher standards of training and remuneration for ministers, better provision for old age, improved machinery for effecting transfers and settlements—these and the like expedients are not to be despised as factors in the difficult task of achieving a happy and contented Baptist ministry. But, when all is said and done, they belong to the external conditions of the ministry, and they do not touch the heart of the matter. Deeper than all else is the spirit of love and loyalty which must unite pastor and people in mutual understanding and friendship—the common conviction that nothing less than the over-ruling guidance and love of God has given them to one another, and has ordained that they should seek their happiness together in the service of the Gospel. This belief in the pastoral office as ultimately a divine vocation has, in the past, lent dignity and worth to many a ministry singularly devoid of worldly advantages. We may thank God that it still informs and inspires the labours of not a few whose pastoral devotion is not measurable by the world's coarse thumb. And it is to that spiritual conception we must steadfastly appeal if, in truth, in the stressful days that lie ahead, the Christian pastor is to fulfil the destiny which God has marked out for him, and to wield in the church and the community the influence which history and experience alike justify us in continuing to expect from him.

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