

The Ministry in Historical Perspective

IT is, of course, the Church as a whole which is called to "minister" in the name of Christ. Dr. T. W. Manson was surely right in giving to his brief but effective comment on the pretentious volume *The Apostolic Ministry*, the title *The Church's Ministry*. He was on surer ground still when he argued that any right understanding of "ministry" in the technical sense recognizes it as the ministry of Jesus Christ Himself in and through His Church. But we are asked to consider those called and appointed to special office and service as "ministers" and to set our particular view of the Christian ministry in this more technical and specialised sense against the background of two thousand years of Christian history. The subject is not only a vast one. It is peculiarly complex and controversial. "No question in church history," says Williston Walker "has been more darkened by controversy than that of the origin and development of church officers, and none is more difficult, owing to the scantiness of the evidence that has survived."¹ What he says of the early centuries applies throughout the Church's history down to our own day, though now it is not the scantiness of the evidence that is the difficulty, but the volume of the controversial material.

The New Testament makes it clear that there were various kinds of ministry exercised within and on behalf of the Church of the first century, but provides us with no clear or comprehensive account of them. The position of the Apostles was obviously a dominant one, but the exact nature of their authority is nowhere defined, nor can we be quite sure as to the number of those reckoned as "apostles." Matthias took the place of Judas among the Twelve, but Paul certainly regarded himself, and was regarded, as an apostle, and there were others to whom the title seems to have been given. This is one of the most serious objections to any rigid theory of apostolical succession based on the view that an Apostle was a *shaliach* or plenipotentiary of our Lord, possessing in a special way His authority and commissioned to transmit it to others. Such a view of the essential or truly valid ministry breaks down when con-

¹ *A History of the Christian Church*, p. 44.

fronted with the facts, few though they be, which come to us from apostolic and sub-apostolic times, as well as being difficult to square with what is said in the Gospels and Epistles.

But the importance of the Apostles, singly and as a group, none can question, nor the importance, when most or all of the Twelve had left Jerusalem, of James, the brother of the Lord. These men owed their authority to having been with Jesus, to having been called to specially close companionship with Him, to having been witnesses of His Resurrection, to having heard and obeyed the Great Commission. They were a unique band, and though the exact limits of the company remain uncertain, it is significant that the earliest extra-canonical literature provides no evidence of any tendency to give the name "apostle" to any permanent order in the Church.

What the Apostles did, while still in Jerusalem, was to set aside seven men "to serve tables" (*diakonein trapezais*). These seven were not called "deacons," though later many in the Church saw their appointment as the inauguration of this special office. The Apostles or their immediate assistants—in the case of Paul, men like Timothy and Titus—also had an important share in the appointment of leaders in the little Christian communities which were soon to be found north, south, east and west of Judæa. The New Testament gives us details of the spread of Christianity into the Mediterranean world. Apart from the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, it tells us nothing of the expansion of the faith in other directions. In the Gentile churches the lead was taken, as in the Jewish synagogues, by the "elders," the *presbuteroi*. By virtue of the functions they exercised, they were soon described, at least in some places, as *episkopoi*, overseers. But the Gentile churches, of which we have details in the letters of Paul, had within them varied types of special ministries, all of them regarded as the direct gift of the Spirit. The lists which Paul gives in *Romans* 12 and *Ephesians* 4 are not exactly the same and are probably not intended to be exhaustive. The emphasis in both places is on the varied nature of spiritual gifts and their complementary character. But the Apostle spent himself in seeking to order and unite these communities. When he was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time, he addressed solemn words to the "elders" of the church at Ephesus (*Acts* 20) regarding their responsibilities. When he wrote to the church at Philippi, he made special reference to the *episkopoi kai diakonoi*. How should we translate these words: "bishops and deacons" as in the A.V. and R.V., as does Moffatt, or "the ministers of the churches and their assistants" (Weymouth), "church overseers and stewards" (Way), "superintendents and assistants" (Goodspeed)? Who knows? The offices, and no doubt the functions also, were in course of creation and definition.

The need for oversight and control was soon apparent. There is plenty of evidence of this in the Pauline letters and in the later books of the New Testament. It is to be found also in the *Didache*, in the *Shepherd of Hermas* and in the other early Christian writings. The mere claim to possess the prophetic gift is not enough. It has to be tested by the content of the prophecy and the character of the prophet. By the end of the first century or the beginning of the second, most local churches seem to have had a presiding "elder," who came to be known as *the episkopos*. He had a group of "elders" associated with him and a group of *diakonoi*, whose services were of a more practical kind. The letters of Ignatius, the *episkopos* of Antioch, show us the emerging importance and authority of these officers. The troubles which came upon the churches through the Gnostic and Montanist movements in the second century helped to make the local *episkopoi* the centres of unity and orthodoxy in the Church. They were the link with the Apostles, the guardians of the faith, the leaders in worship, the executors of discipline. Whatever the differences of development in different localities, by the middle of the second century, substantial similarity had been reached. There was a threefold ministry of a specially authoritative kind: bishops, presbyters and deacons. During the next hundred years this pattern became fixed and universal, at least throughout the Mediterranean world. The deacons were not mere "servers of tables," whether or not that was their original function. They were assistant or embryonic presbyters or priests.

Cyprian, in the middle of the third century, thought of the *episkopoi*, the bishops, as forming together a unity, a sodality, singly and together the guardians of the faith and unity of the Church. Already the diocesan bishop was emerging, with authority over a number of churches grouped around a city centre. Already certain of the great sees had become prominent. Inevitably the bishops of Antioch, Alexandria, Carthage, Rome—above all, Rome—exerted great influence throughout the Christian world. At the very time Cyprian was urging that all bishops were equal parts of one whole, bishop Cornelius of Rome was drawing attention to the fact that his church had 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 sub-deacons, 42 acolytes and 52 exorcists, readers and doorkeepers and that it maintained 1,500 widows and needy persons (Eusebius VI. 43 : 11). This would seem to imply a Christian community of perhaps 30,000 adherents. Many of the presbyters were no doubt the leaders of separate worshipping centres. All were regarded as parts of one church, the *episkopos* of which could not but be an important figure, quite apart from the strategic position of Rome itself and its significant associations with apostolic personalities. More than half a century earlier, Irenaeus, born in Asia Minor, but himself a bishop in Gaul, had been in no doubt that "it is a matter of necessity that every church agree with

or resort to (*convenire ad*) this church (i.e. Rome) on account of its pre-eminent authority or prestige (*propter potentio rem princip alitatem*), inasmuch as the tradition which is of the Apostles (*ab apostolis traditio*) has ever been preserved by them in all countries." (Adv. Haer, iii, 3).

The spread of the faith and the attacks upon the Church, whether local or on an empire-wide scale, enhanced the position of the ministers. They became the key figures, particularly when the sacraments were widely regarded as having a quasi-magical efficacy. A gulf appeared between those in office and the general body of the congregation, between the *kleros* and the *laikos*. The former became an *ordo*, to use the Latin word, set apart for their tasks by a solemn act of ordination. In the West, only men were admitted to office, though the East long recognized deaconesses as part of the ministry of the Church. As Williston Walker comments: "In practical Christian life the clergy by the middle of the third century were a distinct close-knit spiritual rank, on whom the laity were religiously dependent, and who were in turn supported by laymen's gifts."²

The conversion of Constantine and the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the Empire inevitably enhanced the position of the clergy, particularly the bishops. The clergy became a privileged class, exempt from taxation, though official action was taken to prevent men of large fortunes being ordained. It was difficult not to regard them—difficult for them not to regard themselves—as state officials. On the other hand, Constantine described himself as *koinos episkopos* (general bishop) and *episkopos ton ekton* (bishop for the external relations of the Church, or for those outside). Our hereditary prejudice against this situation should not blind us to the fact that the Church as a whole and the best of its leaders never accepted such a view of the position of the clergy. The story of the succeeding centuries is the story of a long continued struggle between Church and State.

The bishop of Rome became the key figure in the struggle. The Roman Church remained orthodox throughout the Arian controversy. She was strong enough to maintain her organization and independence when the barbarians swarmed into Italy. She became the most effective visible symbol of the *civitas Dei*, of which Augustine wrote. The claim to universal jurisdiction in the West put forward by Augustine's contemporary, bishop Innocent I of Rome, was not advanced solely for reasons of personal aggrandisement. It had, of course, no scriptural foundation; it was pretentious; it was fraught with disastrous consequences in the hands of Innocent's successors, who enlarged their claims and surrendered to the temptation to political scheming and compromise in order to secure "papal supremacy." The Church of the West became a great

² *op. cit.*, p. 91.

corporation, with increasing possessions and headed by the Pope. Modern High Church apologists for the doctrine of apostolical succession sometimes quote with approval the saying of Professor Bright: "The Church began in a clergy." From the fifth century onwards it was almost true to say that the Church *was* the clergy, at any rate in the West. There, clerical celibacy was insisted on, as a mark of separation of the ministry from the passions and responsibilities of the world. In the Eastern Church, which was much less successful in asserting its independence of the State, celibacy was only insisted on in the case of bishops. But the consequence of this was that almost all the bishops had to be drawn from the ranks of the monks, who sought to escape worldliness and conventional Christianity by way of asceticism.

The next notable development in the general pattern of the Church's ministry occurred in France. There, in the sixth century, the parish system began to develop. In the rural districts churches were built and endowed by large landowners, who themselves appointed the local clergy. For a time episcopal control was haphazard and uncertain. It was the great Emperor Charlemagne (d. 814), who gave the bishops visitatorial and disciplinary powers over dioceses and regularised the payment of tithes. Before long, certain metropolitan bishops became known as Archbishops (an honorific title going back to the fourth century) and began to exercise authority over wide areas. This development might have become a serious challenge to the position claimed by the Bishop of Rome. In the middle of the ninth century, however, use was made of the forged Isidorian Decretals—the so-called "Donation of Constantine"—to insist that all bishops had the right of direct appeal to Rome.

There is no need to carry this particular story in detail any further. The gradual emergence of the general structure of the Medieval Church has become clear. For all its faults and failings, it was a great Church and within it were those responsible for the partial evangelisation of Western Europe during dark and stormy times. Successful resistance to militant Islam was no small achievement and from within the Church itself there came revival movements, such as those of the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Even if we believe the whole structure and position of the Medieval Church to be departures from the intention of our Lord, we must not write off or ignore what was accomplished in the thousand years between the Council of Nicaea and the days of Wycliffe and Huss. Though there was widespread spiritual famine in many nominally Christian lands and notorious corruption in high places, the theologians, the mystics and the reformers of the Middle Ages are further evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the Church. They came, almost without exception, from the ranks of the

clergy. This we have to recognize, even if we agree with Schleiermacher that "the formation of the clergy into a self-contained and self-propagating corporation has no Scriptural basis of any kind."³

We turn, then, to the Reformation of the sixteenth century with a view to noting its consequences so far as the ministry of the Church was concerned. There emerged in Western Europe, and later spread to other parts of the world, four new patterns, the Lutheran, the Calvinist or Reformed, the Anglican, and the Free Church. Because the Reformation was essentially a re-discovery of, or re-emphasis upon, the Gospel itself, all four patterns were directly, in some measure at least, influenced by study of the New Testament and the early Christian centuries.

Luther set himself to free the Church from "captivity." That is how he himself regarded his work. He attacked three "walls," as he put it: the pretended superiority of the so-called "spiritual estate" over the temporal or secular; the exclusive claim of the Pope to be the interpreter of Scripture; and the claim that Councils of the Church could only be summoned by the Pope. That is to say, in order to free himself and the Church from papal authority, he invoked the help of princes and magistrates as the authoritative representatives of the laity. He rejected the idea of the clergy as a separate, superior celibate caste, chosen and appointed by the higher ranks of their own hierarchy. The important thing was to have ministers of the Word and Sacraments, for the Church itself is where the Gospel is faithfully proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered. Evangelical congregations should, he thought, have a direct say in the appointment of their own pastors. His rejection of the authority of the Pope carried with it the rejection of the episcopal system as it had developed in the Middle Ages. But in carrying through his reform movement, Luther depended on the princes and even spoke of them as "Notbische" —bishops for the emergency. In Saxony he and his friends organized a territorial Church. The land was divided into districts, each under a "Superintendent," who had administrative but not spiritual authority over the parish ministers. The Superintendents were responsible to the Elector, that is, the prince of Saxony. All baptized inhabitants were regarded as members of the Church. For Luther, the only ministry essential to the Church was that responsible for the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, but this was not a ministry to which a man could appoint himself. He must be approved by the laity and the laity expressed themselves through the secular authorities. The pattern remained, and remains, the same in other European lands which adhered to the Lutheran form of the Reformation. But in some places—in Sweden, for example—the "superintendents" continued to be known as "bishops" and

³ *The Christian Faith*, p. 615.

retained continuity with the medieval succession. When Lutheranism spread to the New World, where there was traditional separation between Church and State, it became congregational in respect of the local congregation and synodal in its wider organization, with the ministers regarded much as they are in the presbyterian churches.

The second reformed type of ministry was the Calvinist or presbyterian. Calvin was sure that "the ministry of men, which God employs in governing the Church, is a principal bond by which believers are kept together in one body." His study of the New Testament convinced him that Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists, as mentioned by Paul in *Ephesians 4*, were raised up by the Lord "at the beginning of His kingdom," though He might still raise them up "when the necessity of the times requires." "Pastors and teachers" are those "with whom the Church can never dispose" (*Institutes*, IV. 3 : 4). In his agreement with the city of Geneva in 1541, Calvin based his organization on four kinds of office: those of pastor, teacher, lay elder and deacon. The pastors (whom Calvin is ready to designate "bishops" and "presbyters") had committed to them the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. Each had his own congregation, though he might in case of need assist in others. The pastors were to meet weekly for Bible study and fellowship. The teachers were responsible for the elaborate Genevan school system. The really new and characteristic feature of Calvin's organization lay in the eldership. Twelve laymen appointed by the civil authorities of the city were to meet weekly with the ministers in a *consistoire* or synod for purposes of ecclesiastical discipline. To a separate group of deacons was committed the care of the poor and the sick. According to Calvin "ministers are legitimately called according to the word of God, when those who may have seemed fit are elected on the consent and approbation of the people." "Only pastors, however, ought to preside over the election," and it is they who should ordain the accepted candidates by the laying on of hands. "It is certainly useful," says Calvin, "that by such a symbol the dignity of the ministry should be commended to the people, and he who is ordained, reminded that he is no longer his own, but is bound in service to God and the Church" (*ibid.*, IV. 3 : 16). So far as standing in the Church is concerned, all pastors are equal, each having his own specific charge. Calvin's system has become the basis of all the Reformed Churches and, like his theology, has influenced a number of other Churches as well. That it is anything like an exact replica of the New Testament Church, few would now dare to assert, nor did Calvin himself really make that claim.

The third ministerial tradition emerging at the time of the Reformation was the Anglican. Even in medieval times the Church in England had been somewhat restive under papal claims and

pretensions. But its ministerial structure was that of Western Europe as a whole. The English Reformation resulted from a conjunction of forces, in which it is not easy to disentangle politics and religion. When after three or four decades of uncertainty, Protestantism prevailed, the religious settlement embodied in the Elizabethan Act of Uniformity recognized the sovereign as "Supreme Governor of the Church of England" and assumed the continuance of a three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons, according to the medieval pattern. The marriage of priests had been legalised in 1549. Continental influences secured the inclusion in the Anglican Articles of Religion of the statement that "the visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly administered" (*Art. XIX*). But the party which strove during the next sixty or seventy years for "preaching ministers"—the Puritan party—was slowly ousted from the Church, largely because they challenged the authority of bishops and showed their sympathy with a thorough-going Calvinist polity. The Church of England, during the struggles of the seventeenth century and since, has resisted every effort to modify its episcopal structure, and has transmitted that structure (though necessarily without the State connection) to daughter churches overseas. It has come to cherish it more dearly as a possible link with the Orthodox Churches of the East and the Church of Rome and is ready to defend it on grounds of antiquity and expediency. There are even some Anglicans ready now to try to base their form of episcopacy on Scripture and the position of the Apostles in the early Church.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a fourth form of ministerial tradition emerged, however, that of the Free Churches. It owed a good deal to the work and teaching of both Luther and Calvin, but it sat more lightly to church order, placed greater emphasis on the unpredictableness of the Spirit and based itself on the autonomy of the local congregation. It was also much concerned with evangelism aiming at personal committal to Christ. This is the tradition which came out of continental Anabaptism and English Separatism and which found expression in Baptist and Congregational Churches. Each congregation of believers had the right and duty of choosing its own officers, if necessary "without tarrying for any." The freedom this tradition has given has undoubtedly been owned and blessed of God on many occasions and in many places. It has no hesitation in appealing to the vitality and variety of the early Church. It deeply distrusts any alliance between Church and State, and any sharp distinction between ministry and laity. At the same time, many of its most convinced exponents have realized its dangers and have recognized its blind spots. The Anabaptist Confessions, as well as those of the English Baptists and Congregation-

alists, and their successors in other parts of the world, have insisted that the local church must have officers, that they must be properly chosen, that a man cannot take office upon himself, and that, when a man is chosen to pastoral office, it should be with the concurrence and assistance of other pastors. These safeguards have been almost universally insisted on in theory, though sometimes ignored in practice. Moreover, the free and independent local churches of this tradition have formed associations, conventions and unions, and a number of them have found it wise to appoint ministers with wider functions than the pastoral charge of one congregation. In the seventeenth century some of these ministers were called "messengers." More recently, in England, they have gone by the name of "General Superintendents" or "Moderators." At other times and in other places similar functions have been exercised by ministers acting as full- or part-time secretaries of Associations or Conventions. Somehow or other, ministers themselves must be subject to guidance and discipline. Somehow or other, the churches must have channels or agents through whom the wider unity of the Church can find expression.

These four ministerial patterns—not entirely separate from one another—have taken their place in Christian history beside that of the Roman Church. I want in conclusion to offer three or four reflections on the outline I have given.

First, it seems to me clear that, however important be the authority of Scripture, it is impossible to find in it a uniform pattern or one intended to be the norm for all time. I agree with the present Archbishop of York that "to burrow in the New Testament for forms of ministry and imitate them is archaeological religion."⁴ The more evangelical way is, as he says, "to seek that form of ministry which the whole New Testament creates." That would seem the only right conclusion to draw from the intensive debate which has gone on among scholars since Lightfoot issued his famous essay on the Christian ministry in 1868.

Secondly, the varied forms taken by the ministry have been clearly influenced — inevitably influenced — by external factors, by political and social conditions, as well as by the general ecclesiastical situation at particular times and places. This is not only true of the effect upon the Church's organization of its struggle against Gnosticism or of Constantine's official recognition of the Church. It is true of the part which the clergy were called upon to play in the Middle Ages. The way in which Baptists and Congregationalists regarded their ministries in the nineteenth century was different from the way they had regarded them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The effect of reaction from the Oxford Movement in the Church of England is clear. The

⁴ A. M. Ramsey, *The Gospel and the Catholic Church*, p. 69.

position of the Free Church minister in the United States—the way he is regarded, the functions he is expected to fulfil—is the product in considerable measure of the American way of life. At the present time in the lands behind the “iron” and “bamboo” curtains, new patterns for the ministry are being forced upon the Churches of all traditions. The pressure of circumstances is not something which Christians need regret or always oppose.

Thirdly, whether we welcome it or not, we live today in an ecumenical era, when we cannot ignore the existence, both in the present and the past, of Churches other than our own, which have clearly played a notable part in the furtherance of the Gospel. It is no longer possible for any one Church to say “we and we only have the truth and our church structure is the divinely intended one.” None of our structures has been able to prevent abuses. None of our varied types of ministry has failed entirely to mediate the grace of God and nurture Christian character.

It is therefore, necessary to ask oneself, in the fourth place, whether behind and underneath the varied patterns there is any common purpose. Much barren argument has gone on of recent years as to whether this or that ministry can be recognized by some other Church as “valid.” Trying to match one part of this structure against some other part of that is much less fruitful than asking what is sought from the specialised ministry as a whole. I doubt whether the distinctions which have sometimes been insisted on between the itinerant and the local ministry or the charismatic and the official ministry are really helpful. An alternative method of treating my subject would have been a comparative analysis of some of the classic books about the ministry, produced by the different church traditions. One might start with the Pastoral Epistles and go on to Jerome’s famous letters on the duties of a clergyman and on the death of Nepotian (Loeb edition, Nos. LII and LX, pp. 189 and 265) and then take George Herbert’s *Country Parson* (1652) and Richard Baxter’s *Reformed Pastor* (1656). One might add to the list Spurgeon’s lectures to his students, Bishop Neill’s little book *On the Ministry*, and Daniel Jenkins’s *The Gift of the Ministry*. Beneath all their differences, there is much in common. It is obviously necessary that there be some leadership in the Church, as in any other society. It is also necessary that there be accepted methods of securing it. “The Spirit bloweth where it listeth,” but it is as necessary to discern and test the presence of the Spirit in the twentieth century as it was when the first Epistle of John and the *Didache* were written. When, in 1930, the Council of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland stated, in commenting on the findings of the Lausanne Conference on Faith and Order: “We cannot agree that the ministry, as commonly understood, is essential to the existence of a true Christian church, though we believe a

ministry is necessary for its highest effectiveness,"⁵ the members were going dangerously near to denying the testimony of Baptist history, Christian history generally and the New Testament.

What, then, are the functions the Church requires its ministers to undertake on its behalf? First, the guardianship and proclamation of the faith; secondly, the leadership of its worship and, in particular, the administration of the sacraments; thirdly, a constant witnessing to and safeguarding of the unity, continuity and universality of the Church; fourthly, the shepherding of the flock; fifthly, the setting of a personal example as "men of God." These responsibilities are not solely those of ministers, but they require special discipline and training, if they are to be regularly and effectively discharged. They may lead a Church to develop several different "orders" of ministry. They appear to me to underlie all the various patterns and structures to which I have referred. I see no reason why we should not all learn from history and, after seeing the lacks, dangers and abuses to which certain patterns have been subject, seek under the guidance of the Spirit of God to improve our own particular pattern. Richard Baxter was undoubtedly right when he said that "All Churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal and ability for their work."

Recently I came across two definitions of the Christian ministry. One was given by an Anglican canon of High Church sympathies. "A good definition of the special priesthood," he said, "is that it is the calling, to foster in the laity the deepest possible understanding of their priesthood as believers." The other comes from Professor Richard Niebuhr, in an article discussing the work of American ministers as "pastoral directors." Their first function, he says, is "to bring into being a people of God who as a Church will serve the purpose of the Church in the local community and the world." One might have expected the source of those definitions to be reversed, but they have, of course, a basic similarity. I have tried to set them in historical perspective.

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⁵ Cf. 1948 Declaration of the Baptist Union Council: "A properly ordered Baptist church will have its duly appointed officers."