

Ordination among Dissenters of the early Eighteenth Century

THE following statement is published as an Appendix to the Charge delivered to the Minister by Doddridge, at the Ordination of Mr Abraham Tozer, at Norwich, on June 20th, 1745. It reads:

“As in the beginning of the charge I have touched upon the decent solemnities attending the methods of ordination generally used among the protestant dissenters, it may not be improper to give a brief account of them; especially as I have been earnestly desired to do it, by a pious and learned clergyman of the established church; who apprehends, it may obviate some mistakes, and promote that mutual candour among christians of different denominations, which both of us concur to wish, and labour to promote. There is indeed a little variety in the usages of different places; but that which I have generally seen, does, I believe, prevail in most of our churches, with the exception, and sometimes no more than the transposition, of a few circumstances.

It very rarely happens, that a minister among us is admitted to the pastoral office, till he hath spent some years, as a kind of candidate for it; and, so far as I can recollect, more undertake it after, than before their twenty-sixth year is completed. But as our theological students generally employ either four or five years in preparatory studies after they have quitted the grammar-schools, so they are examined by three or four elder ministers before they begin to preach. A strict enquiry is made into their character, and into their furniture; both with respect to the learned languages, especially the sacred, and also to the various parts of natural and moral philosophy; but above all, into their acquaintance with divinity; and some specimen of their abilities, for prayer and preaching, is generally expected.

An unordained minister is seldom chosen to the pastoral office in any of our churches, for in the members of each of these societies the whole right of election lies, till he has resided among them some months or perhaps some years; preaching stately to them, and performing most other ministerial offices, excepting the administration of the sacraments.

When the society, which generally proceeds with entire unanimity in this great affair, has received what it judges competent satisfaction, the several members of it join in giving him a solemn and express call to take upon him the pastoral inspection over them. And if he be disposed to accept it, he generally signifies that intention to neighbouring pastors; whose concurrence he desires in solemnly setting him apart to that office.

Previous to the assembly for this sacred purpose, his credentials and testimonials are produced, if it be required by any who are to be concerned; and satisfaction as to his principles is also given to those who are to carry on the public work, generally by his communicating to them the confession of his faith which he has drawn up; in which it is expected, that the great doctrines of christianity should be touched upon in a proper order, and his persuasion of them plainly and seriously expressed, in such words as he judges most convenient. And we generally think this a proper and happy medium, between the indolence of acquiescing in a general declaration of believing the christian religion, without declaring what it is apprehended to be, and the severity of demanding a subscription to any set of articles, where if an honest man, who believes all the rest, scruples any one article, phrase, or word, he is as effectually excluded, as if he rejected the whole.

The pastors, who are to bear their part in the public work, having been thus in their consciences satisfied, that the person offering himself to ordination is duly qualified for the christian ministry, and regularly called to the full exercise of it; they proceed, at the appointed time and place, to consecrate him to it, and to recommend him to the grace and blessing of God, and of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great Head of the Church, by fasting and prayer, generally accompanied by the imposition of hands; and the public work of the day is usually, so far as I have been witness, carried on in the following order, or something very near it.

It commonly opens with a short prayer, and the reading some select portions of scripture which seem most proper to the occasion: Then a prayer is offered of greater length and compass than the former, in which most of our common concerns as christians are included; which is sometimes, though less frequently, succeeded by another of the same kind. Then follows a sermon, on some suitable subject, such as the institution, importance, difficulty, and excellency of the ministerial work, the character and

conduct of the first ministers of the gospel, or the like.

After this introduction of a more general nature, another minister usually one of the eldest present, who is a kind of moderator for the day, gives the assembly a more particular account of the occasion of its being convened. The call of the church to the candidate is then recognised, either in word or writing, or by lifting up the hand; and his acceptance is also declared. He is then desired, for the satisfaction and edification of the assembly, to pronounce the confession of faith, which his brethren have already heard and approved; and pertinent questions are put to him, relating to the views and purposes with which he undertakes the solemn charge, that he may be brought under the most awful engagements to a suitable behaviour in it; and an express renunciation of the errors and superstitions of the Romish church generally makes a part of these answers, as well as a declaration of his resolution, by divine grace, never to foresake the ministry, whatever inconveniences and sufferings it may draw after it.

This being dispatched, the presiding minister comes down from the pulpit, and prays over the person to be set apart. There is no particular form of prayer on this occasion, or on any other among us; but I have observed, that the person who officiates is generally led in such a circumstance to adore the divine wisdom and grace, in the constitution and revelation of the gospel, in the appointment of an evangelical ministry, and in supporting the succession of it throughout all ages of christian church, as well as in vindicating it from popish corruption and bondage. Some notice is often taken of what may have seemed most remarkable in providence, with regard to the particular circumstances of the society then to be settled, and the person to be set apart to the ministerial office in it; who is then solemnly offered up to the service of God, and recommended to his blessing, in all the several parts of his work, which are distinctly enumerated. And this prayer seldom concludes without fervent intercession with God, for the christian church in general, and all its faithful ministers of every denomination. And as those rising up to succeed in the work are often mentioned here, so I have had the pleasure frequently to hear the universities of our island, as well as more private seminaries of learned and pious education, affectionately recommended to the divine protection and favour on such occasions, with all the genuine appearances of a truly christian and catholic spirit. When that part of this prayer

begins, which immediately relates to the person then to be consecrated to the service of the sanctuary, it is usual for the speaker to lay his hand on his head; and the other pastors conveniently within reach, frequently to the number of six, eight, or ten, lay on their hands also, at the same time: By which we do not pretend to convey any spiritual gifts, but only use it as a solemn, and expedient, though not absolutely necessary, designation of the person then to be set apart.

When this prayer is over, which often engages a very profound attention, and seems to make a very deep impression both on ministers and people, the charge is given to the newly ordained pastor, who generally receives it standing, as much as may be, in the sight of the whole assembly: And an exhortation to the people is sometimes joined with the charge, or sometimes follows it as a distinct service, unless, which is frequently the case, it is superceded by the sermon, or some other previous address. Another prayer follows; and singing having been intermingled, so as properly to diversify a service necessarily so long, the whole is concluded with a solemn benediction.

I know no method of proceeding on such occasions, more rational, edifying, and scriptural than this: And I hope, few, who believe anything of christianity, can be so ignorant or abandoned, as to make light of such solemnities. But however any of our fellow-servants may judge, I have a calm, steady, and joyful assurance, that transactions like these are registered in heaven with approbation, and receive the sanction and blessing of *the great Shepherd and Bishop of souls.*" (Doddridge, *P. Works* (1803) Vol. III, pp.225ff.

(The above entry constitutes Appendix C of an unpublished thesis, "The Life and Work of Phillip Doddridge, as illustrating the Internal and External Relationships of the English Independent Churches during the first half of the Eighteenth Century" by the late Reverend Frederic William Harris, M.A., B.Litt. (1923-1959), Minister of Solihull Congregational Church 1950-56.)