

Editorial

Ministry and ordination

There is a great concern today, very properly, that the church should work out an adequate doctrine of ministry. So many problems come back to this: the ordination of women, the Covenanting Proposals, the role of the lay ministry, to name but three. It is for this reason that we have devoted three articles to various aspects of the problem. No claims are made that these provide an instant and easy solution, but they do highlight a number of important points.

Firstly, it is suggested that there is no ideal blueprint for ministry either in the New Testament or in early church tradition. Different patterns of ministry emerge and, in relation to these, what is important is discerning the undergirding theological principles. If this tells against those evangelicals who feel that they have discovered a simple ideal in the New Testament, it tells too against those Catholics who argue a particular form of ministry from the earliest times.

Secondly, it is a little too easy to argue from the priesthood of all believers that all distinctions between clergy and people should be removed. The observant may detect a measure of tension between some of our contributors on this point. It is difficult, however, to resist the force of Michael Sansom's contention that 'the ministry of the Old Covenant had precisely the same calling and meaning as that of the New. It was delegated service, designed to enable the people of God to fulfil its calling as a royal priesthood and a holy nation.' Once it is realized, as it often is not, that the idea of the priesthood of all believers has an Old Testament pedigree, then some of the most radical egalitarianism about ministry becomes a little less impressive.

The very fact that God calls to a specific form of ministry, and that this call is confirmed by the church, introduces a distinction. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers does not suggest that everybody is the same. Indeed, as Tom Wright has said, 'properly understood, the body of Christ is an egalitarian's nightmare: everybody is different, and God has so organized the differences that all fit together' (N. T. Wright, *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel and Church*, Latimer House, Oxford 1980, p.31). To ignore this, to become embarrassed with the idea that God calls men to office within the church, to suggest that all ministry must be the expression of personal charisma, is to over-react in the face of the improper and debilitating divide between the clergy and the laity in the past, and is to substitute a model of ministry as defective as the one it replaces.

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Thirdly, ministry assumed a fundamentally mistaken direction when it began to develop without an ecclesiology. Michael Sansom insists on the primacy of pastoral oversight with respect to the ordained ministry, but it is a role carried out within and as part of the priesthood of all believers and 'in no sense... independent of it'. George Carey shows how the minister began to become the only dispenser of grace and, as a Christological model was followed, both the representative of Christ to the church and of the church to God. Thus the mediatorial and sacerdotal functions of the priest came into a controlling prominence, and consequently the priesthood of all believers was drained of significant meaning. There remains today of course, as Sansom points out, a fundamental division 'between those who interpret the office principally in terms of pastoral oversight, with presidency at the eucharist its concomitant, and those who interpret it principally in eucharistic terms with oversight stemming from that.' It is not necessary to be a card-carrying evangelical to appreciate the unfortunate consequences of defining priesthood primarily in terms of a role in relation to eucharistic sacrifice. Bishop Hanson has recently argued most trenchantly against this whole position, and he concludes: 'If Christians in the twentieth century are to achieve a better understanding of Scripture and of tradition and of Christianity as a whole, this sacerdotal concept of priesthood must be either discarded altogether or drastically modified' (Richard Hanson, *Christian Priesthood Examined*, Lutterworth, Guildford 1979, p.99).

Fourthly, our contributors have wrestled with the formal ministry as we have it today. Is it, with its careful hierarchy and its long history of separation and privilege, the best way of representing New Testament principles of ministry? Many ordained men are unsure whether they are in any way different from mature lay Christians exercising gifts in their congregations. Many are sure, with Rosemary Nixon, that great damage has been done because 'the fulness of God's ministry has been stuffed inside a dog-collar.' She makes clear the problem as it relates to Accredited Lay Workers (ALWs). They are identical in terms of selection and training procedures, with ordained ministers, and she therefore contends that 'there is no intrinsic difference between the ministry of the ordained man and that of the ALW.' Yet many such lay workers cannot be ordained, and many more do not want to be because they value the 'lay', 'secular' status. They see themselves as having a role in bridging the divide between the *laos* and the *kleros*, in helping 'release congregations from their blinkered concept of Christian ministry', in providing 'a vision of the sheer glorious variety of ministries which God has given his church.'

Fifthly, if episcopacy is to have theological credibility, it must demonstrate the principle of pastoral oversight. It is a point often made, but one which the Church of England is slow to grasp. If the Ignatian bishop was, as George Carey asserts, more 'like a present-day

vicar than a present-day bishop'; if, as Michael Sansom contends, 'we already have a genuine episcopacy which resides not in the hands of the bishops but in the hands of the parish clergy', then the implications are very revolutionary indeed.

There is much, then, that I believe to be stimulating and helpful in these articles and much that needs to be probed further. If there is more variety of ministry in the New Testament and in the early church than many have supposed in the past, then it behoves the contemporary church to take that variety seriously. As far as the Church of England is concerned there is probably a greater willingness to re-examine and rethink ministry than ever before. There is certainly the recognition of 'the need to be flexible, open to the possibility of the development of new forms and variants of ministry not now foreseen' (General Synod, Ministry Co-ordinating Group, *The Church's Ministry—A Survey, November 1980*, GS 459, CIO, London 1980, p.44). It is churlish to dismiss such encouragement of experimentation as a device—through the non-stipendiary ministry, for example—to create 'mass priests'. The fact that both lay vitality and imminent and dire structural strain call for reassessment, makes it an ideal time for the re-exploration of ministry in the context of the whole people of God.

It is this context which is, of course, crucial. If certain people were set apart in the early church for particular functions, there remained a close identity of purpose between those set apart and those who set them apart—an identity secured by a common commitment to ministry. It was not so much that tensions did not arise between those formally 'ordained' and those whose gifts were more informally recognized—between the embryo *kleros* and the *laos*—but that the totality of commitment to the priesthood of all believers provided a means for the solution of these tensions in a way which did not elevate the role of one at the expense of the other. In the end ministry existed, as Michael Sansom reminds us, for the church. There could not therefore be an unchecked use of power and privilege. The role of the ordinary ministry will begin to be clarified only as we begin to release the whole people of God for the role they must play in his church in his world.

The comprehensiveness of the Church of England

Dr Packer's latest monograph (J. I. Packer, *A Kind of Noah's Ark? The Anglican Commitment to Comprehensiveness*, Latimer House, Oxford 1981) is notable both for its masterly ability to paint a historical picture with a broad brush so that heroes and villains emerge as men with credible and relevant ideas, and for his conclusion, reached not without some almost Newmanesque *angst*, that the comprehensiveness of the Church of England is not a sufficient reason to leave it. His conclusion is not 'strong', in the sense that he offers the maximum amount of sympathy to those who chose a different way, including a separatist and sectarian pathway, and does not attempt to argue force-

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ful and explicit ecclesiological reasons for remaining an Anglican.

Contemporary Anglican comprehensiveness, with its rejection of 'the foundations of the creed', is to be accepted 'reluctantly and with sorrow, as in a fallen world and an imperfectly sanctified church' (ibid. p.35). However, having made the concession in such grudging terms, with an air of fateful and sorrowful inevitability, Dr Packer does warm to the task of commending the possible value that even unorthodox 'theological explorers' may bring to the contemporary restating of the faith. There is within their work often 'stimulus' and 'help in understanding' (p.35). He brings his customary logical and verbal power to the rejection of 'the sectarian idea' that evangelicalism 'ought to practise self-sufficiency in theology.' 'It does not follow that adherents of other mutations of Christianity, mutations which seem less close overall to the spirit, belief and thrust of the New Testament, have nothing to teach me on this or that particular point.' It does not follow either that God is best served by the assumption that there are 'no new truths, or new applications of truth'. Rather 'theology is an ongoing corporate enterprise which in principle involves the whole church' (p.37), and this consequently includes theologians who may be heretical at particular points. This is not a concession to all opinions, however heretical, being tolerated. There are limits and there should be parameters, but there should not be a hounding of those who at particular points have doubts about traditional orthodoxy: rather there should be a refutation of their arguments.

It is a fine and moving statement. The only quibble is that if the 'sectarian idea' is as limiting as Dr Packer finally implies that it is, and if there is as much value as he urges in the sharing and debating of ideas within the church, broadly defined, then there is a far stronger case against the sectarian evangelical and for the comprehensive Anglican approach (even in its modern weak form) than the tone of most of the book, with its great sympathy for those who have chosen the way he rejects, seems to concede. His argument is further strengthened because, in the end, he sets aside the mood of rather bleak pessimism and manages to be hopeful about the Church of England, judging that 'there is no solid reason to suppose that those Anglicans who contend for the historic gospel are fighting a losing battle' (p.38). We must trust that he is as accurate in this judgement as he is persuasive in his general argument.

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