

MINISTERS OF THE WORD

by
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Christian church circles in the last fortnight have had their interest focussed on the enthronement of the Archbishop of Sydney which took place in St. Andrew's Cathedral. Not only was the ceremony widely covered by the national newspapers by story and picture but it had, I believe, the largest television and radio coverage up to the present of any religious event. So in speaking of the enthronement I am speaking of something of which we are all aware. The impressive ceremony had its centre in the Archbishop taking his place in his stall or throne, that is his seat which is reserved for him in his cathedral, and it marked the official beginning of his ministry as Archbishop. The word "throne" comes from a word meaning "chair", and interestingly enough this is also the meaning of the word "cathedral" which is from another Greek word meaning "chair". While the word "see" which is used of a bishop's

cathedral church as well as of his diocese as when we speak of the see of a bishop comes from the Latin word meaning "chair". Thus the three words connected with the office of a bishop, namely "enthronement", "cathedral" and "see" all combine to remind us that the work of a minister of God is that of teaching, because of course the word chair indicates the office of a teacher. This meaning still survives in modern English in university usage, as when we speak of a Chair of Physics or a Chair of Medicine, meaning the office of chief teacher of that subject within the university. So a bishop's chair or throne or cathedral or see is a reminder that the work of the minister is to be a teacher.

St. Paul in his letters to Timothy and Titus lays down as an essential qualification for a bishop, that is to say for the minister of a congregation, that he should be "apt to teach" because his ministry is carried out by

teaching the Word of God. The whole Christian life depends on a knowledge of the Word of God. The Christian life begins when a person hears God's good news, or Gospel. And we continue to grow as Christians as the content of God's Word is understood by our minds and accepted by us so as to control our wills. This is why we should all regularly read the Bible for ourselves; but God's Word becomes more effective when it is conveyed to us personally through the words of a fellow Christian. This is the value of group Bible study by way of reminding each other of what the Bible has to say with regard to our personal living and future hope, and it is particularly the work of the Christian minister to do this within the congregation. Unfortunately so much other activity crowds into the life of a minister these days that very often time for prayer and study of God's Word is reduced to a minimum so that when the minister preaches it is not really the Word received from

God for the congregation, but he is merely filling up the time - doubtless with good sentiments, but which may be nothing more than his own thoughts. I believe this is the real source of weakness of the modern church.

First things must come first. Time must be set aside for study of the Word of God with prayer, and then for ministering that Word. Members of the congregation also must recognise that since their own spiritual life depends upon their growing in the knowledge of the Word of God, they must make it their first obligation to study the Word of God and to grow in its knowledge. I suspect that the average Christian is quite unaware that this study is his duty, let alone a primary duty.

Christ exercises His Lordship over His people through His Word which is written in the hearts of His people as they read it or hear it preached. Thus Christian

ministers are only channels, though of course fully personal channels, of God's Word. As St. Luke put it, they are servants of the Word. They do not originate the Word but minister it. It is here that the Roman Catholic Church makes a fundamental mistake. With that church the ministers, particularly the bishops, do not merely minister God's Word written in Scripture but are themselves a source of God's Word. In this way the bishops and in particular their head, the pope, become identified with the Word of God. I quote from paragraph 14 of the Constitution of the Church of the Second Vatican Council to illustrate this identification of bishop and Christ, in Roman Catholic dogma: "Christ who rules the church through the supreme pontiff and the bishops", and from paragraph 10, "The ministerial priest by the sacred power he enjoys, forms and rules the priestly people, acting in the person of Christ", and Section 21, "In the bishops Jesus Christ

is present in the midst of those who believe". And in Section 25 "In matters of faith and morals the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and to adhere to it with religious assent". The same Constitution of the Church assigns infallibility in teaching not only to the pope speaking ex cathedra and to an ecumenical council of bishops, but also to the bishops as a whole when not gathered in council. Infallibility, of course, belongs only to God and the reason why the Roman Catholic church ascribes it to the pope and to the bishops is because that church believes that the words of their ministers are the words of God, and not simply a ministry of the Word of God as contained in Scripture. This is a fatal mistake, for it is a substitution of a false word of God, for the true Word of God in Scripture, and it also takes away from the hearer the duty of checking what his minister, including his bishop,

is saying by comparing it with the Word of God as given to us by the Spirit of God in Holy Scripture. This is because the bishop's words are thought themselves to be words of God and therefore require no check. As I say, the Second Vatican Council has endorsed in the clearest language this fatal mistake by which the words of men are clothed with the same authority over the conscience which only the words of God should exercise.

This fundamental error leads to the Roman Catholic position of requiring their faithful to give implicit obedience to all church rules or canon law as it is called. These laws of the church are clothed with divine authority as they are the laws made by the bishop, so that the bishop is regarded as a ruler rather than as a minister. But in New Testament religion the only ruler over the Christian's life is Christ, and His Word. This rule is naturally enough only over a heart that has accepted

Christ as Lord and over a conscience that is regenerate by the Spirit. We get a good illustration of this in the Pastorals where St. Paul denounced certain heretics who have made shipwreck of the faith. Now on Roman Catholic principles these persons should at least have been excommunicated, but all that St. Paul tells Timothy and Titus to do is to rebuke them sharply, that is to say, to apply the Word of God to their conduct. This alone is the instrument of discipline which the Christian minister has to exercise. As I say, it is only effective over Christian hearts. When a professing Christian proves himself a hypocrite by his refusal to obey the Word of God when it is ministered by a fellow Christian, we are to withdraw our fellowship from him. That is all. (II Thes. 3:6). Here again is a weakness in modern church life. We are not aware of our duty to withdraw our Christian fellowship from a person who is plainly a hypo-

crite; in fact modern church buildings make this reaction difficult. But we are not to "boss" it over one another in the Christian group. This was St. Peter's message to the ministers . amongst those to whom he wrote. The task of all of us is to minister God's Word to one another and God through His Word will speak to the Christian's conscience and through the conscience direct the will of His children, who form His church.

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