

THE MINISTRY - CHRIST'S GIFT TO HIS CHURCH

The ministry is Christ's gift to His Church. It is the means by which the Head of the body, Christ Himself, administers His authority in each local ecclesia. It is an essential feature of the divine economy for the Church of God. Thus, in no sense can the ministry be thought of as a human invention, designed by the wit of man for the better administration of the life of the Church. Nor does it exercise an authority delegated to it by democratic processes within the body of the Church. It is theocratic, not democratic, both in its origin and authority. In John's symbolic portrayal of the Son of Man Who dictates His letters to the seven churches of Asia, John said, "in His right hand He held seven stars," (Rev. 1:16) and the Son of Man Himself defines the seven stars as "the angels (or messengers) of the seven churches." (Rev. 1:20). The ministry is Christ-centered, Christ ordained, and Christ empowered.

A striking example of this is revealed in the history of Israel's wilderness journey. Moses, who hitherto had made no decision of importance without waiting for the clear direction of the Lord, heeded the voice of his father-in-law, Jethro, in a most important matter. "What you are doing is not good," said Jethro, "you and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone. Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God, and bring their cases to God; and you shall teach them the statutes and the decisions, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe; and place such men over the people as rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide for themselves; so it will be easier for you and they will bear the burden with you." (Exodus 18: 19-22). In spite of its apparent common sense this was carnal policy. In implementing Jethro's advice there is no record that Moses sought the mind of the Lord in the matter. Schofield makes the terse comment: "Jehovah entirely ignored the worldly-wise organisation and substituted His own." There can be no spiritual power in a ministry not inspired of God. Thus, when we read in Numbers 11 of Moses' renewed complaint: "I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me," (11:14) the Lord Himself responded by ordaining a wider ministry: "the Lord said to Moses, Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of the meeting, and let them take their stand there with you; and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone." (16-17). When these men were gathered before the tabernacle "Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses, and took some of the spirit that was upon him and put it upon the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them they prophesied." (25).

As if to emphasize to the people that the ordination of the seventy was by the Lord and not by Moses, the same chapter tells of two of the chosen elders, Eldad and Medad, who were detained in the camp for some reason and had not gathered to the tabernacle. The spirit rested on them also and they prophesied in the camp. (26-30).

The two principle ministerial offices in the Old Testament were, of course, that of the priest and the prophet. The Levitical priesthood was the gift of God to His people.

In Numbers 18 we read that the Lord said to Aaron: "Behold, I have taken your brethren the Levites from among the people of Israel; they are a gift to you, given to the Lord, to do the service of the tent of meeting. And you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil; and you shall serve. I GIVE YOUR PRIESTHOOD AS A GIFT, and any one else who comes near shall be put to death." (6-7).

Within the Levitical priesthood are clearly defined degrees of authority and responsibility. To the family of Aaron alone was committed the highest responsibility of the priesthood. Other Levites, the Lord said, "shall attend you (i.e. Aaron) and attend to all duties of the tent; but shall not come near the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar, lest they, and you, die." (Numbers 18:3).

The seriousness of arrogating to oneself a ministry not ordained of God is revealed in the story of Korah's rebellion and his death by God's judgment. Following that episode Aaron's position is put beyond all doubt by the miraculous budding of his rod.

Though blind in so many other ways, Israel of today is still sensitive to the divine origin of her ministry. Thus Israel is now without a priesthood, and consequently, without a sacrifice. Since the destruction of the carefully preserved temple records in A.D. 70, no Jew is now acquainted with his ancestral tribe of origin and, therefore, dare not assume Levitical functions or the special Aaronic privileges. Jewish religious leaders of today eschew the word "priest" and are known as "Rabbis."

If the priesthood, whose function it was to represent the people before God, was God's gift to the Old Testament Church, how much more we should expect the calling and office of a prophet to be initiated by God, for this ministry was to represent God to the people - to declare by divine authority: "Thus saith the Lord!"

Without labouring the point, it may be said that, where full details are given in the Scriptures of a prophet's calling, the calling of the prophet, his preparation and his commissioning were, in every detail, initiated and guided by God. It is interesting to note that the first one to be termed a "prophet" in the Old Testament was Abraham - and it was by revelation to Abimelech. "Abraham is a prophet," God said, "and he will pray for you, and you shall live." (Gen. 20:7).

The Lord's appointment of Aaron still provides the best definition of a prophet. "The Lord said to Moses, See, I make you as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron your brother shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go out of his land." (Exodus 7: 1-2).

Thus the prophet is the spokesman who represents another.

Of the Old Testament prophets perhaps Isaiah's experience gives the clearest illustration of the call and work of this ministry for both the Old and New Testaments. His call is recorded in Isaiah, chapter 6, and reveals certain clearly defined experiences. Commenting of this chapter, Dr. Griffith-Thomas said:

"Isaiah had a vision of God.....and this sight of God was at the foundation of all he became. The vision at once led to the result intended by God in giving it; conviction of sin. 'Then said I, Woe is me! For I am lost!' Conviction is immediately followed by confession: 'I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.' To confess was to be cleansed - 'Then flew one of the seraphim to me, having in his hand a burning coal.....Behold this has touched your lips, your guilt

is taken away, and your sin forgiven." Then comes the call of God, followed immediately by the prophet's response and God's commissioning: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I, send me. And He said Go, and say to this people....." (Isa. 6: 8-9).

As with the call, so with his work, the New Testament minister is accurately patterned on the experience of the Old Testament prophet. The work of the ministry is indicated in Isaiah 61: 1-3. It might be argued that this passage is purely Messianic. It was indeed clearly fulfilled by the personal testimony of the Lord Jesus, but it is the priceless privilege of the truly called minister that he continue the same ministry. The same Messiah who said of Himself, "the Lord has anointed Me to bring good tidings to the afflicted" commanded His disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15).

Now the pattern of worship in the Old Testament called for diverse functions and specialists. We read of "singers," and "gatekeepers," and the "Nothinim" rendered as "temple servants" in the R.S.V., and of "scribes." The first scribes were originally no more than "secretaries" or "recorders." Thus we read in II Samuel 8: 17- "Zadok.....and Ahimelech... were priests; and Seraiah was secretary." But in time the office was widened to describe those who not only made copies of the law, but were also concerned in its interpretation. We read of Ezra that "he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses." (Ezra 7:6).

Certain aspects of the Old Testament ministry are now irrelevant. The work of the Levitical priesthood, for instance, has been entirely fulfilled in Christ. God Himself has now provided "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world." Similarly, that part of a prophet's work which entailed the proclamation of further revelation was completed by Christ: In Hebrews 1 we read: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son." (Heb.1:1-2).

In spite of this, the New Testament is wider in scope and offers richer service, in keeping with the more satisfying, both to God and to man, and richer New Testament worship. Thus Paul, writing of the ascended Christ, quotes Psalm 68:18 - "When He ascended on high He led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." These gifts, Paul writes: "were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the building up the body of Christ....." (Ephes. 4:11-12).

In a similar passage in I Corinthians Paul writes: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various tongues." (I Cor. 12:28).

It is important to notice that in both these passages Paul compares the church to the human body. Christ is the Head, but for the administration of the visible church, the ministry serves as the visible head. In this way, it surely can be said that the ministry is the vicar of Christ on earth. Paul says: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (II Cor. 5:20).

The needs of the body are many and varied - and they are physical as well as spiritual. To neglect either is detrimental to the other.

It cannot be over emphasised that the New Testament ministry, like that of the Old Testament, is called, prepared and commissioned by the Lord. "Follow Me, and I will make you to become fishers of men." was a command and not an invitation. Those who offered for service as disciples were politely discouraged - "Foxes have holds, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head." "You did not choose Me," he said later to His disciples, "but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16). Of Saul of Tarsus the Lord said: "he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel." (Acts 9:15).

As the ministry is Christ's gift to the church, it is the church that benefits through the service of the ministry. Nevertheless the Lord also delegates to the church certain responsibilities in connection with the ministry. Most important of these is that the church is appointed the instrument for giving effect to the ministerial call. The Holy Spirit said to the Church at Antioch: "set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off." But the record immediately goes on - "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit....." (Acts 13: 2-4).

Further, the church's role in establishing the reality of a call to the ministry has increased considerably since apostolic times. A man may say he is "inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon him this office and ministration" but the church must also hear the voice of the Holy Spirit saying, "Separate unto Me this man." The church hears this voice by a careful examination of the candidate's qualifications - physical, mental and spiritual, and by evaluating the man's spiritual service in the church. It is the church's task to provide the course of preparation to which it will submit the candidate. Then, finally, before the laying on of hands, a last appeal is made to the church, by the reading of a "si quis" notice, to declare any possible hindrance which might indicate that the voice of the Holy Spirit is saying "No!" The church's increasing responsibility was anticipated by Paul's injunction to Timothy: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands." (I Tim. 5:22).

Not only is the call and commission to the ministry initiated and effected by God, but the whole of a man's subsequent ministry is under His control. He determines the place of his service. "An angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (Acts 8:26). Following Peter's vision at Joppa "the Spirit said to him, Behold, three men are looking for you; Rise and go down, and accompany them without hesitation; for I have sent them." (Acts 10:19-20).

Sometimes the leading was inferred by the closing of doors. We read of Paul, Silas and Timothy being "forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word in Asia." Then, when "they attempted to go into Bithynia the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." (Acts 16:6-7).

The ministry is held in the power, the wisdom and direction of Christ. "The love of Christ controls us," says Paul (II Cor. 5:14). And the love of Christ provides a variety of ministrations to fit the varied needs of the church - apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, workers of miracles, healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Those who have seen films of Dr. Graham's crusades in foreign countries will testify to the extraordinary skill required of those who can speak in various kinds of tongues! These various types of ministrations are not to be thought of as separate, mutually exclusive, specialized callings. Most ministers will recognize, humbly, that God has endowed them with gifts that would cover some service in quite a number of these fields. Any appraisal of the life of Paul the Apostle would surely show that at some time or other he exercised every facet of ministerial experience. On the other hand Luke's service would have been confined chiefly to the fields of evangelism, teaching and healing. In addition to being an apostle, Peter was a prophet, an evangelist, a pastor and teacher, a worker of miracles. John's chief contribution lay in teaching and shepherding, but was by no means confined to these fields of service. In Acts 6 we read of the appointment of the seven "diakonoi" for service as administrators. The success of their administrative work is not even recorded. It is possible, of course, that the initial practice of the church of sharing all things in common was shortly abandoned. So, within weeks, or a few months at the most, we read of Stephen "full of grace and power," doing "great wonders and signs among the people," and teaching with such wisdom and power that his disputants were confounded (Acts 6:8-10). We read of Philip proclaiming Christ with great power in Samaria and performing miracles (Acts 8:4-8), to be followed by his personal work with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-38).

From these Scriptural examples and subsequent experience it would appear that every ministry has a certain core of activity around which, and in support of which, other avenues of service may be exercised. This inner core is surely evangelism and shepherding. Each minister is fundamentally an evangelist and a pastor. This simply means that the primary responsibility of the ministerial office is to obey the two great commands of the risen Lord: "preach the Gospel" and "feed My sheep and My lambs."

To sum up. The source of the ministry is Christ, it is His gift to the church, it is the instrument of His choice, it is empowered and directed by His wisdom. The work of the ministry is to proclaim the evangel and to guide and tend the flock of God. The sphere of the ministry is the world. But everything that is said of the ministry applies in some sense to the whole church. If the ministry be likened to the visible head of the visible church, neither can serve God in independence of the other. The head needs feet and hands as surely as the feet and hands need the head. To the extent that the church leaves its ministry to discharge alone its spiritual responsibilities, then to that extent the church has degenerated into a mere "service station."

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