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WHAT MUST NOT CHANGE IN A CHANGING MINISTRY

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Times are changing and society is changing and changes are going on in church life and in the form of the Christian ministry. What are the features of the ministry which must not be allowed to change? We must first ask what is the ministry? How do we define it? It may perhaps be described as a full-time life occupation serving the Christian congregation. But what form does this service take?

There are lots of occupations in which men and women spend their lives and which are forms of service to the Christian congregation, for example, in an old fashioned church the verger is a full-time occupation serving the congregation; and people who work in central church offices whether as administrators or typistes may be said to be giving their life to serving the Christian congregations. But I suppose that none of those who are engaged in these occupations would say that they are essential biblical ministries, useful though they are in our present circumstances. So the question must be faced: Is there an essential full-time Christian ministry which has its roots in the New Testament?

From one point of view every Christian has a ministry. God gives to each of us gifts and we serve Him as we use these gifts for other peoples benefit. This is our ministry, and it is a Christian ministry, so that if all ministries are similar then none can be full-time.

There are three passages in the New Testament which speak of different ministries in the Church; Romans 12, I Corinthians 12; and Ephesians 4 and it is plain that not all of these ministries and perhaps none of them are full-time ministries to which men or women might devote their whole life time. For example, Prophecy, we read of Agabus and the four daughters of Philip the Evangelist as being prophets, but prophecy is intermittent and is not a full time occupation. It does not, for example, require preparation but is uttered as the Spirit moves the Christian. Other gifts, such as speaking with tongues or interpretation of tongues, mentioned in these passages, would not be full-time occupations, nor would the gifts of healing or the working of miracles.

On the other hand, there are examples of full-time ministries in the New Testament; pre-eminent is the ministry of Jesus who in the period of time covered by the Gospels gave himself exclusively to His ministry which was that of teaching and proclaiming the imminence of God's rule. Teaching was the most conspicuous aspect of Jesus' ministry for it was by the title of 'teacher' that He was known to the general public; this is disguised in our old fashioned English by the word 'master' but 'teacher' is

a more accurate translation. A typical gospel phrase describing Jesus' activity during the three years he travelled around Galilee and Judea is Matthew 9:35 - "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness." He taught the character of God's rule and He used numerous parables to illustrate various aspects of the rule or kingdom of God. Signs of God's kingdom accompanied His preaching, signs of healing and of casting out demons, and these signs were in accordance with what the Old Testament foretold so that all who knew their Old Testament scriptures would have recognised that Jesus was the Messiah. In New Testament times, however, the signs of the presence of God's kingdom are no longer the Old Testament outward signs so much as the interior signs of the change of heart. St. Paul states that the kingdom of God is righteousness, that is, a restored relationship to God; peace, that is a restored relationship to one another and joy in the Holy Ghost, a restored relationship of our own interior spirit.

Another example of full-time ministry in the New Testament is that of Paul. His was an itinerant apostleship and by its very character was of necessity a full-time occupation for he was the apostle to the Gentiles and so travelled throughout the Mediterranean world. However, he spent three years in the important city of Ephesus. Here we read that each day he taught in a public lecture room and we know that he added to this a teaching ministry in the homes of his hearers. He himself describes the content of his ministry as giving to Christians a world view in which God and the Lord Jesus Christ was the centre, that is, he taught, as he put it, the whole counsel of God, holding back nothing that it was profitable for them to know. He also described his ministry as a proclaiming of the kingdom of God because teaching the whole counsel of God and proclaiming the kingdom of God are two aspects of the one activity. Christ was, of course, the centre of his preaching, or proclamation, and he described this activity in another way when he called it preaching the good news of the grace of God or again when he described his work at Ephesus as a calling for repentance towards God and faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ.

We see then from Acts 17 and 20 how St. Paul filled up his time at Ephesus. It was a full time ministry teaching about God's activity in Jesus. This teaching was, of course, pastorally centred in the sense it was directed to peoples needs so as to evoke a response and so the teaching would not be dry or arid but would contain both exhortation and admonition. He himself said that for three years at Ephesus he admonished the Christians night and day with tears.

Consideration of the character of the Christian religion shows there will always be a place for full-time ministry of

the Word of God. The Christian religion is a religion of faith in Christ the Lord. Faith is distinguished from superstition by being based on the truth and distinguished from rashness by being based on the knowledge of the truth. All this depends on true teaching for we are not born with a knowledge of the truth. Moreover, Christianity is a religion of personal relationship, that is, of fellowship. Fellowship only comes through hearing and responding to a word spoken, so it is plain that a ministry which conveys and makes clear the truth about God and conveys God's Word to the mind and so the the conscience of the hearer is an essential characteristic of Christianity. If this ministry dies out then Christianity dies out.

The same conclusion may be arrived at from a slightly different approach. Jesus Christ is Lord but He can exercise no Lordship nor can obedience be the response of the Christian unless the mind of Christ is known and known relevantly to the circumstances of the Christian. This again requires a teaching ministry which understands the mind of Christ and how it applies to modern circumstances and which accompanies this teaching with exhortation and admonition, directed to the conscience of the hearer. A ministry of Christian teaching and preaching is a life time occupation because teaching cannot be discharged without preparation and preparation requires time. For the Christian teacher to give himself to preparation, to the study of the Word of God and its relevance, was never more needed than in the present generation. New questions keep on looming up, such as the rightness of nuclear war, abortion, and such theories as evolution and so on. If the Christian teacher is to guide rightly the minds of the Christian congregation he must give himself to a good deal of reading and reflection. The unprepared teacher and preacher is like the blind guide.

Closely related to teaching is the other aspect of the Christian ministry, a proclamation or telling forth of the good news of the kingdom of God and the rule of God exhibited in the life and in the victory of Christ on Calvary and in the day of judgement. Just as teaching is essential to Christian faith and obedience, so proclamation is essential for the conversion of sinners and calling them to repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles regarded their work of proclamation and teaching as so important and as so full-time an occupation that they were not willing even to give time to the humanitarian activity of helping in the distribution of money that had been collected for the needy. They told the Christians that others ought to come forward to undertake this distribution while they gave themselves to prayer and ministry of the Word. We read this in Acts 6.

Prayer takes time and prayer is an essential accompaniment to the proclamation of the Gospel because the proclamation of the Gospel of God is a frontal attack on the kingdom of satan, and only prayer can ensure success in this struggle with the spiritual powers of darkness. It is by prayer and proclamation that God's kingdom is advanced and God's people are called out of darkness into the light of Christ.

I was interested to hear from a friend who knows Billy Graham, the American Evangelist, that he had said that if he had his time over again he would give more time to prayer and study. For prayer and preparation are the essential foundations of the Christian ministry of preaching the Gospel of the kingdom of God and of teaching the whole counsel of God to those who respond to that Gospel by repentance and faith. Prayer and preparation absorb time and that is why there will always be a place, if Christians are willing to support it, for full-time ministry undertaken as a life occupation. Ministers for their part must be careful to see that their time is not eroded by other activities, good though these may be. They must take as their example the apostles who asked their fellow Christians to see to it that others discharged the work, in their case, of distributing money to the needy so that they could give themselves to the essential aspects of their ministry.

So if we ask what must not change in the Christian ministry, it is its character of teaching and proclamation, the teaching of the whole counsel of God, that is, the giving to Christians a Christian world view and the drawing out of the implications of this for daily life, and secondly the calling out of the people of God by the proclamation of the kingdom of God, that is, the rule of God, made clear in the victory of Christ crucified at Calvary, and in the resurrection and in the coming of Christ as King and Judge. For this proclamation, prayer is essential and essential for true and relevant teaching not only prayer but also solid preparation and study. These things take time. If a man is called by God to this Christian ministry he is called to something to which it is very worthwhile to devote his life. He will find plenty of opportunities for proclaiming God's rule, and for teaching both publicly and in peoples homes. Such a ministry is an essential ministry in the purposes of God for the maintenance of faith and obedience and the calling of people into fellowship with God. Those who are called by God to this ministry will find it a very worthwhile way of spending a life. It will not be without tears, as St. Paul experienced at Ephesus, nor without its dangers perhaps, but certainly it will not be without its rewards and crown.

A D D E N D U MOTHER MINISTRIES OR WAYS OF SPENDING ONE'S LIFE

There are many ways by which a Christian may spend his life and earn his living to God's glory and to the benefit of his fellow men. How are we to distinguish those excellent and Christian life occupations from the essential Christian ministry?

Perhaps the test is whether a person has the opportunity in them of proclaiming the kingdom of God, and of teaching the whole counsel of God by instruction, exhortation and admonition. It is true that every Christian has opportunity from time to time of doing these things. Yet some are called by God to give the whole of their time to these things; and if they have no independent means, other Christians make this possible by supporting them. Those who occupy the most part of their time in this way may be designated as Christian ministers.

The question is whether such excellent occupations as school teaching, social counselling hospital or migrant chaplaincies, church administration and theological teaching and so on ought to be regarded as forms of the Christian ministry. On the definition above, the test to be applied is what opportunity do they give for proclamation and teaching the Christian faith. Even if these activities are not included in the Christian ministry they may be regarded as directly assisting that ministry. A verger who keeps a church clean would certainly be regarded as assisting the ministry. But not all of them could be designated as directly assisting the Christian ministry but ought to be regarded as humanitarian activities, alongside such occupations as the medical profession or the nursing profession or occupational therapy. It is possible to be a selfish doctor and to be in Medicine for what you can make out of it; but it still remains true that Medicine is a direct service to other people. The same is true of Social Counselling. Doubtless Christians, whether ordained or lay, who enter such professions as Social Counselling or School Teaching are not motivated by selfish reasons though there is always a temptation to fall into selfishness, and even the minister in the parish is not exempt any more than is any other Christian. But the fact that a man carries out his work unselfishly in a profession of immediate help to people does not in itself make it the Christian ministry. Nor does it become the Christian ministry simply because it is controlled by a church body such as Synod. Nor is it the Christian ministry because the man who is performing it has been ordained. The test that is suggested is whether or not it gives full opportunity for preaching and teaching, with necessary time for prayer and preparation which are essential for such preaching and teaching.

THE MINISTRY AS AN INSTITUTION

The Christian church, which is a heavenly concept and which translated into factual terms means fellowship with God and with one another through the blood of Christ, expresses itself in the 'here and now' in fellowship with each other in the name of Christ in local gatherings of which Christ says He is in the midst.

Because of human nature and the structure of human life, these local fellowships, which are the way that the concept of the church exists on earth, form patterns and structures, and recognised ministries both within them and linking them. These structures which the church, i.e., heavenly fellowship, of necessity creates in a world of space and time are visible in the sense that other

people who are not Christians can recognise the structures quite easily, and they therefore become institutions in society, taking their place with all the other institutions that go to form a society or community. Institutions are the framework of society and healthy Christian institutions make a healthy Christian society. The members and ministers of the church must recognise that though they are primarily members of a heavenly entity they are also members of human society which is not fully Christ centred and that their church with its institutions (including its ministry) and its denominational structures are important elements in the social structures of the society of which they themselves are members. This implies that the Christian minister has not only a spiritual role but also an institutional and social role and that he cannot ignore this latter concomitant of his ministry without injuring the human society and community of which he is a member and consequently to which he has a duty.

On the other hand the minister must remember that his primary work, i.e., the primary way of spending his time, is that of prayer and ministry of the Word, so that his insitutional capacity in society must not be allowed to erode his time and energy that he cannot give himself to the ministry of the Word and prayer. For if he fails in this prior function of being a Christian minister his institutional function will cease to be a beneficial element in the structures of society, and the unique contribution of the Christian structures to the structures of our society will be lost.

One further point should be added. It is possible for a Christian minister to mistake what his function should be as a Christian minister. A good example of this is provided by the first chapter of the book "The Gagging of God". The description of the parish rings very true. The vicar and his wife are discouraged that after several years of work they have not achieved their objective which is also regarded as a proper objective for the ministry both by the bishop and the missionary and his team. It is also plainly regarded as a proper objective by the writer of the book for he does not suggest an alternative objective but only a better method of achieving the commonly agreed objective, i.e., he urges better methods of communication. But the objective is wrong and therefore not achieved, and hence the sense of frustration by the writer of the book as well as by the innumerable vicars and their wives whom he truly describes.

The agreed objective appears to be the increase of the 30 to 50 church attenders to say 500. This would be regarded as success because it would fill the church building to overflowing; but why 500 rather than 50 should be regarded as the objective when there are probably 10,000 people in the parish, does not appear. Moreover, simply improving methods of communication will not lift the 50 to 500, except in unusual circumstances. The real objective ought not to be to persuade more people to participate in the institutionalised liturgy and congregational activities, but rather to create a true fellowship in Christ amongst those who live in the area so that into this fellowship others may be converted by the public and private proclamation of the Gospel. Fellowship can only exist in the area of truth, i.e., reality, and there is something unreal in coming to the church to participate in a pre-arranged institutional activity as though the congregation was consequent to the arranging of the church service instead of the service and liturgy being consequent to the congregation's presence. There is a profound difference between on the one hand coming to church in order to be together, i.e., to express the heavenly fellowship so that having come together, i.e., being together, doing

together the things you would otherwise be doing separately, e.g., praying; praising; and listening to God's Word; for these then become real fellowship activities which all participate in even if only sitting silently and listening with mental response. And on the other hand coming to an activity which logically is conceived of as existing prior to the coming together.

So long as we think of our church activity in this latter way we will not be able to avoid an air of unreality and therefore absence of fellowship and even the finest communication and urging will not persuade people to participate in such an activity. For strictly speaking it is difficult to see any reason why they should, and people will be aware of this even if they cannot articulate the reason for it.
