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Baptists and the Ministry

THE NATURE OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

IT must be stated at once that this theme is too big for an adequate discussion within the limits of this article. Questions about the ministry are being debated in nearly all the major Protestant denominations. The present situation of the churches, at least in European countries and particularly in Britain, is provoking practical questions about the recruitment and standards of the ministry, about forms of training and about the functions of the ministry in a scientific, technological society. Added to these practical questions are the theological considerations about the nature of the ministry aroused by the ecumenical encounter in which the Protestant Churches are engaged. In view of what is happening, no one may doubt the importance of the doctrine of the ministry, though some thoughtful minds are aware that too much discussion may give the doctrine an undue importance.

What this article seeks to do is to suggest an approach to the question of the ministry which may serve both to keep the doctrine in its true perspective and to illuminate the nature and function of the ministry.

The approach which I propose to make sets out from the total argument of the Epistle to Ephesians. It is customary, of course, in discussions about the ministry to quote fairly freely from the fourth chapter of Ephesians, especially the statement that "he gave some apostles; and some prophets . . . for the edifying of the body of Christ," but it may be doubted whether the citing of important statements is as valuable as the comprehension of the total theme of any writing. It is true that Ephesians is much more than a theological argument. John Mackay is right in saying that "this letter is pure music," "what we read here is truth that sings"; yet through the music sounds one theme which he describes as "God's order."¹ Through the music, the prayers, the devotion and the practical counsel of Ephesians we can discern the splendour of a majestic argument which, sweeping through all time, has its beginning and its ending in eternity. Let this argument be briefly surveyed.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." In spirit it begins with praise; in thought with God. God is eternal and

¹ *God's Order, the Ephesian letter and this present time*, p. 98.

His purpose is eternal. It existed in the mind of God before the foundation of the world. In eternal realms no man can move with dogmatism; so Paul speaks of the "mystery of His will." Yet in the realm of faith the believer can speak, for faith is response to revelation; so Paul can assert that God has made His will known in Jesus Christ. In Him it is perceived and experienced that God's purpose is that of reconciliation; He "will gather together in one all things in Christ." The purpose of reconciliation becomes in Christ the work of reconciliation. "Christ is our peace." It is in 2 Corinthians that Paul writes: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself," but it might also appear in Ephesians. Through Christ sinful men are reconciled to God; they are brought home to God.

But this new relationship with God immediately alters human relationships. The middle walls of partition are broken down; a new "household of God" is being created. This is the Church which thus comes into being according to God's purpose and by His act of reconciliation in Christ. At the same time, the Church exists as the new fellowship—"the communion of the Holy Spirit"—exhibiting and mediating God's reconciling love to mankind. The Church, as "the fulness of Him that filleth all in all," brought into being according to the Divine purpose and by means of the Divine act, is the realm in which the reconciliation or grace is known and experienced.

The whole Church, therefore, exists to exercise within the world a ministry of reconciliation. The Church is the body of which Christ is the head, i.e. the Church is obedient to His control and direction, and He is the one who reconciles all to God by His death on the cross, so creating for all a means of access to the Father. All who are in the Church belong, therefore, to this reconciling process which is God's will and share the ministry by which it is communicated. This is the vocation wherewith all believers are called and all are to walk "worthy of the vocation"; this task is further defined as "endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The ministry of reconciliation which the Church exercises is further emphasized and placed within the context of God's purpose in sayings such as: "Be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you." "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; and walk in love as Christ also hath loved us. . . ."

Within the context of this ministry to which the Church is called, Paul mentions the spiritual leaders given by God to His people; they are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, i.e. believers who are gifted thus to serve in the Church. They are "for the edifying of the body of Christ till we all come in the unity of the faith. . . ." What is significant is that these leaders are given by God to His Church that the ministry of the Churches may be

fulfilled; but the ministry of the Church is the ministry of Christ who reconciles until through Him God fulfils the purpose which He had before all time to gather all things together in one.

Here then is our starting-point for an approach to questions about Christian ministry. The ministry of the Church, and ministry in the Church, are set within the context of God's purpose revealed in Christ. It is this context which determines first the nature and secondly the function of ministry.

(i) It has been made clear that according to Ephesians, Christian ministry is primarily the ministry of the whole Church, since the Church is the realm in which God's reconciliation is known and through which it is mediated to the world, but in the exercise of this ministry, the Church is guided by those who possess gifts of leadership. If now we use the term "the ministry" with its modern connotation whereby it refers to the full-time, duly appointed official, we are bound to say that according to Ephesians "the ministry" is given to the Church as a part of the reconciling ministry of the Church. The point is clear in *Ephesians* iv. 11, 12, when we accept the translation, which is widely agreed that God's "gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service" (J. B. Phillips). A number of translators and commentators accept this, e.g. Armitage Robinson writes: "The equipment of the members of the Body for their function of service to the whole is the end for which Christ has given these gifts to His Church,"² and he translates the phrase in verse 12 thus: "for the complete equipment of the saints for the work of service."³ The "ministry" is given to the Church to guide and lead the Church so that it may fulfil its reconciling ministry or service (*diakonia*) in the world.

John Mackay says that "the whole idea is startling, but decisive. The supreme function of the so-called officers of the Church . . . may be defined thus: It is the function of 'ministers' so to equip the 'saints' that is, members of the rank and file of the Christian congregation . . . that they too may render service to Christ and the Church in the fullest sense of the term."

A similar point is made by the Bishop of Southwell. He commits himself to the judgment that ". . . it is the Church which validates the Ministry, not the Ministry which validates the Church."⁴ Again, he writes: "In the scriptural meaning the laity *are* the Church—the people of God, the Christian community. The priest does not cease to belong to the laity when he is ordained to the priesthood—he is given a special commission and function in it. The Ministry is the ministry of the whole Church, and it is to be exercised by the whole Church." "If the Ministry is the ministry of the whole

² *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, p. 99.

³ *ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴ *Vocation and the Ministry*, p. 33.

Church, then the operation order of the ordained man is helping the Church itself to fulfil its ministry."⁵

This view of the nature of the "ministry" implies a rejection both of the Catholic doctrine which finds the essence of the Church in a sacerdotal order which possesses a grace not available to the laity and of those conceptions which loosely assert that the Christian fellowship can dispense with the "ministry." The emphasis of the New Testament falls upon the ministry which the whole Church is called to exercise and for which it exists; the ministry follows the pattern of the Son of Man who came to minister and to give His life, thus revealing the eternal purpose of God and making it effective in a new way among men. The "ministry" of apostles, prophets, etc., is the gift of God to enable the Church to fulfil its ministry; thus it belongs to the total ministry of the Church, though it has its special function.

(ii) The argument developed in the foregoing paragraphs that the "ministry" exists to enable the Church to minister among all men so that God's purpose of reconciliation might be fulfilled, has necessarily included references to the functions of the ministry, but now more specific statements must be made about these functions.

These functions are not the result of an individual's decision; they may not be made the subject of our choices at all. Since they belong to the total ministry of the Church and this is the reconciling ministry of Christ in the world they are controlled by the pattern of His life. It is not being argued that Jesus gave certain rigid commands which exactly define the functions of "ministers," but it is suggested that Jesus made clear the ways in which the Messianic community of His disciples should fulfil their ministry. He commissioned them to preach and teach, He taught them to pray, He gave the symbols of baptism and of bread and wine, He empowered them to care for people, e.g. healing the sick and casting out demons; and for these functions He promised the gift of the Holy Spirit. These were the functions of His own earthly ministry, so that in obeying His injunctions the disciples are communicating Him.

The experience of the Church since the time of the New Testament, has confirmed the necessity and validity of these functions for the maintenance of the Church's life and witness. The "ministry" enables the Church to fulfil its ministry by guiding the Church in its doctrine through preaching and teaching on the basis of the apostolic testimony, by leading the Church in its prayer and worship, including the observance of baptism and the Communion, and by caring for all the members in all their personal circumstances and relationships, so that the community is constantly created.

But all these functions fulfil their purpose within the Divine reconciliation as the Church in all its ministry is innerly responsive

⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 41 and 50.

to the Spirit. Ministry is a spiritual attitude as well as a visible activity. The outward function will be simply dead bones, lifeless skeletons of theological formulations, of traditions and patterns of worship, of ecclesiastical organization unless the Spirit within imparts life. The earthly life of Jesus is again the pattern for all His activity of preaching, teaching, healing, doing good, etc., was the expression of His perfect inner obedience to the Father. He came in the power of the Spirit into Galilee. The point we are making here is very clearly expressed by Paul in his discussion of spiritual gifts in 1 *Corinthians* xii-xiv., for He does not add love (*agape*) to the spiritual gifts by which the Church exercises ministry, as if love is the supreme gift. He sets love in the centre of his discussion as that which alone makes all gifts effective. Since for Paul, as Nygren among others has emphasized, love is primarily the love of God for men, 1 *Corinthians* xiii. is Paul's way of saying that all functions of ministry fulfil their purpose only as they are directed by a true inner response to God.

Where the minister fulfils these functions in the Spirit of Christ the Church is edified, i.e. it is enabled to perform its ministry among men so that the will of God is done on the earth.

We have now reached the point at which certain practical questions begin to emerge, but in facing these questions we must continue to think within the context of God's eternal purpose of reconciliation in Christ, by which and for which the Church and its ministry was brought into being. First of all, we have to ask: how does the Church discern that one of its members is called and gifted by God? Here at once we notice how our previous argument has determined the form of our question. It may be true that God in His freedom calls a person to be a prophet or an evangelist without using the community of His people; it may be equally true that individuals have been rightly conscious of being called in this personal and individual manner, e.g. Amos: "I was no prophet neither was I a prophet's son . . . the Lord took me as I followed the flock and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel"; or Paul: "When it pleased God . . . to reveal His Son that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood." But if the Church is the outcome of God's purpose in Christ and if forms of ministry are called into being to enable the Church to minister, then normally the inner call of God will need to be discerned and ratified by the judgment of the Church. This is really saying that God calls His servant, God equips him and God guides the Church to appoint him.

But what is involved in this process of God guiding His Church to appoint? The answer is twofold.

(i) The members of the Church are responsible for the Church's ministry and that means that they are responsible for discerning the functions which individuals may fulfil and for encouraging them

to exercise their gifts. In discharging this responsibility the members have to exercise powers of judgment and discernment. Apostolic injunctions to "try the spirits" or to "prove all things and hold fast that which is good," as well as the apostolic prayer "that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment that ye may approve things that are excellent" make it clear that knowledge, insight and wisdom are all needed if the Church is to meet the obligation. Discerning that God is calling a believer to the "ministry" is no vague, mystical process; it is an act calling for robust qualities of mind and experience.

I doubt whether at present this obligation is sufficiently acknowledged. Each local church has the responsibility of discerning among its members one who may be gifted for the "ministry," of encouraging and guiding that member, thus confirming his inner call. And all this should be done consciously and deliberately because the ministry is essential to the life of the Church. I agree with the Bishop of Southwell's emphasis that "men are available if we go and look for them. Seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened to you. It is for the Church to assure them that they are wanted and deliberately to call men to its ministry. They will not be found if we merely 'wait and see' or if we seem to be only half-convinced about it. . . . All practising Church people in all parishes must take this as a personal assignment."⁶

(ii) The Church must then proceed to prepare such a person for the work of the ministry and after proper preparation appoint him to a specific task. All this is the responsibility of the Church in order that it may properly fulfil its ministry in the world. Consideration of what is involved in proper preparation is beyond the scope of this article; it is obviously a very important question about which the Church needs to give much more thought and to accept more fully its true obligation. But further consideration must be given here to the question of appointment.

In the light of the practice of the Apostolic Church and of subsequent Christian experience it cannot be doubted, I think, that God uses the local church to give recognition to the inner call and the possession of spiritual gifts and that, therefore, the local church may appoint a member to exercise some particular function in its ministry. It was thus that the church in Jerusalem was used to bring the seven members into a special service and was responsible for appointing them. Thus, too, the church in Antioch was used to discern the fitness of two of its "teachers," Barnabas and Paul, for evangelistic work so that the church solemnly appointed them for this service and they reported back to the church "from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled."

Here the point should be made that when a local church recog-

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 88.

nizes that God has called and equipped one of its members for the work of the ministry and sets that member apart, it is authorizing him to exercise his ministry simply within and on behalf of that church. A classic illustration in Baptist history is the relationship of Andrew Fuller and the Soham Church. Both he and the church in which he had been spiritually nurtured gradually became aware that he possessed gifts for pastoral work so that the church called him for a time to exercise his gifts in preaching and then later ordained him as pastor of the Soham Baptist Church.

This process of discernment, appointment and ordination is not quite the same as the present practice among Baptist Churches whereby a local church may invite a stranger to conduct its worship on two Sundays, may receive information from responsible people about him and may then invite him to be its pastor. This process is important and where it is properly carried out involves the church in responsible discernment and judgment; but it is not the long and personal process whereby a church discerns the calling of God in one of its own members and is used by God to appoint him to the work of the ministry. An attempt to equate the two has led us into a position in which we have allowed the invitation of the local church to gain an undue significance.

What is required, therefore, is a more thoroughgoing attempt to understand the calling and appointing of a minister in the light of the doctrines enunciated in Ephesians. Here it is made clear that all local communities of believers are members of the body of Christ. They belong together in Christ as the separate members of a physical body belong to the common life of the one body. 1 *Corinthians* xii. is as definite an exposition of this theme as the passage in Ephesians. The implication is that individual communities cannot act as if they were isolated units for that is to deny the body—a grave sin according to 1 *Corinthians* xi. 29. This does not involve the impossible ideal that each local church should always act with the consent of the total Church, for a community of believers under the Lordship of Christ and guided by His Spirit is competent to make decisions and to act upon them, but it does mean that the local church will always make its decisions as a member of the body.

This understanding of the nature of the Church has to be worked out in the situation in which we now find ourselves. The Church has become a vast organization and is separated in the "denominations." Without going into the question of the relationship of the concept of the body to denote the totality of the Church as a living organism and the complex forms of organization which Christians have developed, it might be pointed out that on the highest level organizations can be a means whereby many local churches are able to realize and experience their life together in the body. Not all forms of organizations are justified, but organization itself is the

necessary instrument of our membership one of another. Ecumenical thinking may emphasize the sinfulness of the fact of denominations, yet organization does belong to a theological understanding of the nature of the Church. At this stage of the Church's ongoing journey the Baptist Union, e.g. has a proper place in the theological concept of the Body. It is not simply a convenient—or inconvenient!—piece of organization. With all the limitations and inadequacies that inevitably belong to what mortal, sinful man constructs, it is still an expression of the fellowship of churches in Christ. The concept of the Church as the body of Christ means that the Association and the Union are as valid expressions, within our present situation, of the corporate life of the believer as the local church.

In regard to the calling and appointing of a minister our churches have made it possible for the whole fellowship to be involved in the process. A local church may discern a man's calling and gifts, encourage him to use them and so be able to testify to them; a college in which he has been trained and churches in which he may have served as a student pastor will be able to give evidence of his preparation and growth; mature believers who have known him personally and groups of responsible Christians who interview him will be able to make judgments about him. All this evidence then should enable those given the responsibility of acting on behalf of the churches within the denomination to appoint the man to the work of the ministry. In this way the fellowship of Baptist Churches, recognizing that they are members together in Christ, and all responsible for the total ministry of the Church, recognizes God's call and gifts in a member and sets him apart for the work of the ministry; he may then be regarded as authorized to exercise ministry in all the Baptist Churches to which he may be invited.

The public act of appointing, which is usually termed ordination, may take place either in a local church or at some appropriate gathering of the churches. What is important is not the place in which the service is held but the total way in which the service has been authorized. Behind it should be a series of responsible judgments and careful preparation; and in this process the whole fellowship should take part. Hence the service of ordination should not be held until the process of spiritual preparation and testing is complete and it should be an act on behalf of all the churches. This suggests that the Association Meeting or the Union Assembly is the proper place for the service of ordination, yet this has the disadvantage of introducing an impersonal element. I should make the judgment that the place is much less important than the people present and the process which justifies the service of ordination.

One further question remains. It concerns the relationship of Ordination and Induction. If the process of ordination is seen to be the responsibility of the total fellowship of churches, it is an act

which can take place once only in a man's lifetime and at the beginning of his ministry. Induction is then the repeated act by which a man is authorized to exercise his ministry in a particular sphere.

Furthermore, the placing of the work of the ministry within the context of God's eternal purpose of reconciliation manifest in Christ and wrought out in the Church makes it clear that the proper and immediate sequel to his ordination is his induction to a sphere of service. It is at the point that I should dissent from the argument developed by the Rev. N. Clarke in the *Baptist Quarterly* of January, 1958. We are in clear agreement that the ministry is rooted in the ministry of Christ, though I should want to go beyond that to the purpose of God, but I cannot follow his emphasis upon an institutional priesthood and upon the climax of the ordination in the observance of the Lord's Supper. I should regard Induction as the climax of Ordination, though I do not think that this implies that the two must always take place on the same occasion. The suggestion that the Lord's Supper is the climax of the Ordination Service means that the one who is called, gifted and appointed by God through His Church, is turning again to God to receive in the bread and wine the symbols of His grace. But God's grace is the beginning and the foundation of the calling, the gifting and the appointing. The purpose and climax of the whole process is ministry (*diakonia*) i.e. the proper climax of ordination is a going out from God's presence and in the Spirit of God to serve sinful and needy people. Ordination does not lead primarily to the Lord's Table but to the evangelistic proclamation or to the hospital visitation! This is what we mean in asserting that the sequence of ordination is induction.

We do well to remember here *Isaiah* vi., where the climax of the experience of Divine call is the Divine command: "Go, tell this people." This, too, is the pattern of our Lord's earthly life. He was the Son of Man who came to minister and give His life. This, of course, is T. W. Manson's argument in *The Church's Ministry*. He rightly bases the Church's ministry upon the ministry of Christ and stresses the fact that the ministry of Christ was not an office or a status or a privilege; it was the saving, compassionate activity of the Servant of the Lord among men and for men. This, says T. W. Manson, "provides the standard and pattern for the life of the followers of Jesus."⁷ Ministry is to be understood in these terms. What a man is set apart to do is—to minister!

In a final paragraph I want to call attention to the danger inherent in too much discussion about the details of ordination. We can exaggerate the importance of methods and forms of ordination. They should be ordered according to our fundamental conception of the nature and purpose of the Church as that is defined by the

⁷ *The Church's Ministry*, p. 17.

revelation of God's purpose in Christ; what is, however, of primary significance is not how a man is ordained, but how a man ministers. This warning is underlined by some words from Daniel Jenkins :
“ . . . an undue preoccupation with the rights and status of the ministry can be a sign of a church which is losing its mobility . . . it is desirable that the church should act decently and in order in matters of recognizing, calling, entitling, empowering and dressing its ministers and these matters deserve some attention, but it is infinitely more important to ensure that the essential work of the ministry should not be held up because of preoccupation with them. Can anyone who considers the state of the Church on the American frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries deny that the Methodists and Baptists who provided a great deal of ministry with little attention to order, were more in the right than the Episcopalians, who provided very little ministry but did it in a very decent and orderly fashion? The ultimate test of Ministry is not whether it is properly authorized according to the view of the more settled Christian communities but whether through it the power of Christ is made effectively visible and the Church carried forward upon its pilgrimage in obedience to His will for mankind.”⁸

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⁸ *The Protestant Ministry*, p.47f.