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## BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONAL

**David Clines**

*A cautionary note is sounded by David Clines, who holds a personal chair in biblical studies at Sheffield University, in this penetrating and questioning contribution.*

These reflections do not have as their aim a reconstruction of the church organization of primitive Christianity as a model or ideal to which our churches today should uncritically conform. Most Christians would allow that the commonality of goods, however precisely it was practised at Jerusalem, was something of a mistake; and many would further concede that even the Pauline instructions for church life not infrequently embodied an uneasy compromise between ideal and actuality and so cannot always have the status of definitive norms in settings remote from their own. But we have to agree nevertheless that in the continuing reformation of the church all the best ideas turn out to be inherent—whether express or latent—in the scriptures.

The tendency of the present paper, for it does not profess objectivity, will be to argue that the institution of professional religious persons in the church is out of sympathy with certain authentic strands in New Testament Christianity. There may be other strands with which it is in harmony, though I do not at present discern them.

### **Power**

Every human society confronts the issue of power. It is in equilibrium to the extent that it has resolved that issue, and at odds with itself while the issue remains open or is opened up by fresh circumstances. Churches are no exception. Christian churches display a wide range of power structures, from an episcopal, hierarchical structure where the locus of power is clear, to the consensual fraternity where its more even distribution leaves its position vague.

The present question is whether any particular mode of power-holding is more in accord with the spirit of Christianity than others. This is in

principle an easy question, for there are clear teachings of Jesus on this very subject. In the narrative of the disciples' dispute over power (Matt. 20:20–28 // Mark 10:35–45 // Luke 22:24–27), Jesus explicitly contrasts the nature of power in secular society with the structure of the community of his followers. His words are subversive of normal patterns of relationships in human society, in which it cannot make sense that the greatest is the slave (Mark 10:43). The question of power is equally addressed in his saying, 'Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' (Matt. 18:4; cf Mark 9:35; Luke 9:48), and in his action of washing his own disciples' feet (John 13:12–26). The Roman Catholic biblical scholar John McKenzie writes:

These . . . sayings are more than conventional exhortations to a vague humility. Children, lackeys, and slaves in ancient society were not the bearers of authority; indeed under most prevailing law they were not even persons. The saying of Jesus not only forbids self-assertion in general, but in particular that kind of self-assertion which is seen in the exercise of authority. Effectively his answer to the question of who is the greatest among the disciples is: no one . . .

If Jesus had wished to say that those in authority should rule with justice and kindness, there are a dozen ways in which this could have been said. But such words as 'rule' are exactly the words which he did not use. The sayings reveal a new conception of society and of authority, which must be formed not on the model of secular government, but on the mission of Jesus himself.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect Jesus stands in opposition to religious social norms of his own day, inherited from the social structures of ancient Israel and the Roman world. But there is not simply a conflict between Jesus and the Old Testament on this issue, for the Old Testament itself displays a radical questioning of traditional power structures. Such questioning is not incidental; it forms the theme, so it may be argued, of the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua—2 Kings) of Israel. That work sets forth the view that every institution of authority that has been known in Israel's history—military leaders, judges, priests, prophets, and kings—even when the institution has been introduced as a divine gift, has failed and has brought Israel into its present condition of exile. The indictment is not against sinful human nature in general but precisely against institutionalized authority, the structure of power. It is striking too that in several eschatological passages about rulership deliberately unmasterful and power-free imagery is used (Isa. 42:2, the servant does not lift up his voice; 50:4–6, the servant is disciple-like, and suffers calumny; Isa. 53; Zech. 9:9, the king is humble and riding on an ass). Equally significant is the absence of any messianic figure from the majority of depictions of Israel's future bliss; even an ideal authority figure is not indispensable in the eschatological society.

It cannot be said that the church, historically speaking, has had any

kind of success in realizing the teaching of Jesus or the expectations of the Old Testament in regard to the issue of power in the church. Every hierarchical system is structurally inimical to this gospel, however nice the people involved in it are. (I say the gospel, and not just the teaching, of Jesus, because his vision of society not organized according to power is itself a gospel of freedom from tyranny.) And every major Christian denomination is structured hierarchically.

A congregationalist church polity—however defective in other respects its adherents may be—is in principle and systematically a rejection of the power structures that are as typical of the Christian church generally as they are of secular society. It must be defended as an authentic expression of what is perhaps Jesus' most fundamental teaching on the church.

I would contend further that faithfulness to that teaching would also inhibit the concentration of power in the hands of any individual within the congregation. To godly servants of the Lord and the church engaged in full-time Christian work it may sound farcical to speak of concentration of power in their hands. But it would be burying our heads in the sand not to acknowledge that professionalism brings power, whether welcome or not, whether noticed or not. The continuity, experience, and growing expertise of the religious professional—whatever benefits there may be—cannot fail to develop his power *vis-à-vis* the congregation who not only (*ex hypothesi*) lack what they have engaged him to provide, but become progressively more powerless in proportion to his growth in power. I hasten to add that every such power-holder worthy of his office will do all he can to mitigate the effects of this syndrome, often with good success, but such mitigation should not cloud the fact that the professional power syndrome is in operation.

Suppose a congregation appoints a youth worker. They do so because they collectively feel unable to do for the young people of the church what they feel should be done. But they are different from another congregation which has the same need and the same incapability because they have money and the others have not. They hire a youth worker who already has experience and training, know-how and skills beyond the ordinary. If he is not very good, equipment he wants and visits he wants to organize will often be denied him and he will be relatively powerless. But if he is expert and successful he will acquire power, power with the congregation for getting what he needs for his work, thus—perhaps without even realizing it—entrenching himself further, making himself indispensable, improving his job security (which he has as much right to as members of the congregation have). The congregation thought it was buying a talent; but it was hiring a man—with a completely different relationship to the congregation from every other member: built upon the cash nexus is the professionalism, which is what the worker has to sell, and what the

congregation is buying. And with the professionalism they have bought a centre of power.

A simpler example: in my church A the last person out switched off the lights and locked the door. You could stay as long as you liked. In my church B we had a (paid) janitor. Everyone had to be out in time for him to catch his bus. You couldn't tell him that you would lock up for him because that would suggest his job was dispensable, that he wasn't worth the money. What's the point of paying a janitor if anyone could do his job? So he had the power to turn people out. He was embarrassed about it. His profession (confirmed by the cash nexus) gave him a power he didn't really want.

### Office

The question here is whether the notion of 'office' in the church is characteristically Christian. By the notion of 'office' I mean the idea that an individual may be so identified with a function in the congregation that he may be said to 'own the job' (as they say in the Australian civil service). If, as I will argue, it is not characteristically Christian it follows, I think, that a 'professional' ministry cannot be either.

It may or may not be relevant that Jesus did not apparently develop offices (or specialisms or titles) among his disciples. There are of course the Twelve, but they do not seem to be functionally different from the Seventy, for example, or from the wider group of disciples—who are often 'confusingly' inseparable from them. The only functional distinction appears to be of Judas, as the treasurer. Other functions seem to be discharged collectively or interchangeably.

Perhaps more to the point is the practice of the Pauline churches (excluding the churches of the Pastorals for the moment). Inasmuch as every function in the church is regarded as a divine charism, no individual can properly be said to function as a professional or expert or official. It is widely believed, indeed, that Paul worked with the idea of at least three offices or orders of ministry, apostles, prophets and teachers (cf 1 Cor. 12:28). This view, however, seems to me mistaken. For not only is it impossible to draw lines of demarcation between these 'offices' (which should be possible, even with our imperfect historical knowledge, if different persons filled different offices), but also the list of 'offices' varies in other Pauline writings (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, Eph. 4:11; prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, 'contribution', acts of mercy, Rom. 12:6-8). This suggests that what is named are functions, rather than offices—activities that may be performed by different persons at different times rather than the official responsibilities

of designated individuals.<sup>2</sup> Such an understanding seems confirmed by two factors in the context of 1 Corinthians 12:28ff. One is that the matter of differentiation of ministries (functions) has already been raised in verses 4–11 under the heading of *pneumatika*, charismata meant to be practised within the context of congregational worship; these various utterances are directly manifestations of the Spirit (v. 7) and so not the differing contributions of differently designated church officials. The same is likely to be true of the ministries of verses 28ff; though they operate on a broader front (the whole life of the church rather than simply occasions of worship) there is a good deal of overlap and hence parallel (prophecy, healing, tongues). The second factor is the extensiveness of the list of verses 28ff. It is indeed conceivable, in theory, that Pauline churches had designated 'teachers' and 'prophets', but it is inconceivable that they had 'orders' or classes of miracle-workers or tongues-interpreters. The implication is that if 'miracle worker' was not an office, neither was 'teacher'.<sup>3</sup>

I reach the conclusion that in the Pauline church at Corinth (and also in the non-Pauline church at Rome), at least, there were no designated ministers, no bishops, deacons, elders, teachers, prophets, healers as such—though no doubt such functions were being carried out. It is important what we make of this fact. It would be wrong to attempt to ape this particular form of primitive Christianity as an arrangement attested in the New Testament and therefore normative. What we need to know is whether such a structure of a congregation was perceived as embodying some characteristically Christian idea or belief. The answer is pretty plain: the diversity of gifts, their coming to expression in different individuals at different times, and their cumulative value for the life of the congregation, are seen as evidences of the Spirit's activities. Even routine and inconspicuous functions within the church are perceived as executed through the specific apportionment of charismata. Not all, indeed, are speakers with tongues or healers (12:30), but any can be, if the Spirit chooses. No one is locked into a particular role, no one is designated a foot or hand or eye of the body, everyone may legitimately desire better charismata for they will not be doing someone else out of a job or invading their sphere.

Any congregational structure, therefore, that allocates specific roles to specific individuals is inimical to the operation of the Spirit—whatever else may be said on its behalf. And the more formal that allocation is—say by the engagement of a professional person who is appointed to his office by a religious ceremony of laying on of hands—the more the freedom of the Spirit is restricted and the more the church suffers the 'routinization of charisma'.<sup>4</sup>

Christianity on this point is sharply discontinuous from the Old Testament. There the religious wellbeing of the community is dependent

upon the activities of a professional religious class of priests who act as mediators between the holy and the secular. Because they belong to the sphere of the holy, they themselves are 'holy', ie belonging to God, in a sense that the rest of Israel is not. In Christianity the distinction between professional, holy persons and the rest of the community is abolished, not by eliminating the category of the holy but by extending it. It is now the community as a whole who are the 'saints', 'the holy ones'. There cannot therefore be any group within the Christian church that corresponds to the Israelite priesthood; it is the community as a whole that collectively performs a priestly function (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The analogy drawn already in 1 Clement 40—44 between the threefold hierarchy of high priest, priest, and Levite and the threefold Christian ministry points up the contrast between an authentic Christian structure of the congregation and one that lives under the shadow of alien institutions.

We should not of course overlook the fact that the Old Testament itself envisages a re-shaping of structures that is in line with this strand in Christian theology. The realm of holy, for example, is seen in Zechariah 14:20f as indefinitely extensible—as far as farm-horses and 'every pot in Jerusalem and Judah'; this implies the abolition of the distinction, in the new age, between priests and non-priests. The Joel prophecy of the pouring out of the Spirit on 'all flesh', with sons and daughters prophesying, and old men and young men alike (not differentiatedly) receiving visions, is explicitly viewed in the New Testament as characteristic of Christianity (Joel 2:28f; Acts 2:16–18). The idea of specific and regular roles cannot be integrated with the concept of the church as a community sustained by the Spirit.

What about the institution of elders, which, it cannot be denied, was an official role in some primitive Christian churches (though not in Greece or further west so far as the evidence goes)? Luke has Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in churches of Asia Minor (Acts 14:23), we find elders at Ephesus (20:17), and see Titus being commissioned to appoint elders in every city in Crete (Tit. 1:5); and of course the Jerusalem church has its body of apostles and elders (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 22; 16:4). The striking fact is that the institution never receives any theological justification in the New Testament (unlike the elaborate theological buttressing and refinement Corinthian church practice receives). It is a fact of (some) first-century church life, but it does not cohere with any specific Christian teaching. Of course, given that a congregation is governed by elders, it is the duty of those elders to exemplify Christian virtues and of an apostolic teacher to spell out what the requisite virtues are (Tit. 1:6–9). But that is not the same thing as saying that a church without 'appointed' elders is defective. The institution of elders was equally at home in Judaism and in

the local government of Hellenistic cities. 'It was only natural that the church, once organized as a collective body, should adopt the institution', writes M. H. Shepherd;<sup>5</sup> natural, yes, but not necessarily in accord with the radical Christian programme of a new conception of social structures. It had its values (like Paul's vow) in a society where it was a familiar organizational form, but it is open to question whether it has the theological staying-power to entitle it to last into our century.

The main issue here, however, is not the institution of presumably 'unprofessional' elders, but the questionableness of 'professional' roles within the church.

### Provisionality

It is a marked feature of the activities of Jesus and of the early church that an air of provisionality, of interim arrangements, surrounded them. I would suggest that permanent or long-term commitments by the congregation (such as church buildings and church professionals) tend to mask the theme of provisionality that is integral to the Christian message. However 'realistic' it is to assume that the return of Christ is not 'at hand', it is always taken for granted in the New Testament that an expectation of an imminent Second Coming is the only legitimate Christian posture. And however, 'realistic' demands for stability may be, the New Testament is everywhere promoting a shaking of the foundations. It may be forgivable to crave more solidity than the peripatetic rabbi or a roving apostle allowed themselves, but what is forgivable can only be a fault; and it is strange that the church should build into its structure elements that proclaim *sotto voce* that, to be frank, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.

Jesus is an itinerant preacher who has foresworn family and home. In this he has no role model, traditional or contemporary (the Cynic travelling teachers can hardly be his model). His lifestyle can only be one deliberately adopted to enmesh the breaking in of the kingdom of God. He, and it, appear now here, now there; he encounters people with the message of the kingdom and calls for instant response. His hearers don't get second chances, time to think things over or bury their dead. The kingdom arrives fitfully, whimsically (according to its own will), presents itself as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and demands the risk of every certainty. Through all his preaching runs a sense of urgency and unsettledness.

As for his disciples, the very notion of sending them out in mission is a reversal of rabbinic practice in the direction of his own unsettledness (rabbis gather disciples into an academy). His mission-charges to the twelve or the seventy, which must also be the model for the Great



Commission of Matthew 28:19f, impose on them the same itinerant life, persecuted in one town and fleeing to the next (Matt. 10:23).

This strand of Jesus' way, even when it is expressed in mindset rather than in lifestyle, remains pervasive in the New Testament perhaps more in evidence than we at first notice. The church is a pilgrim people, without any abiding city here (Heb. 13:14). There are few pages in its scripture that are not composed in an eschatological key, and its finale is not a revelation of the distant future but of things which must shortly come to pass (Rev. 1:1). Even a seemingly down-to-earth tribute to the status quo like Romans 16 lets slip a sentence like 'the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet'—as if to jolt us into recognizing that the only future the church should contemplate for itself is its final destiny.

All this seems a long way from questions of ministry in the church. What I am concerned to urge is that no structures should be developed that by their nature stifle this delicate strain of otherworldliness, unrootedness and expectation beyond the odds that is quintessentially Christian. Efficiency, far-sightedness and orderliness are not perhaps anti-Christian, but neither are they typically Christian. The more we build such concerns into our church structures, the less recognizably Christian our churches become.

1. J. L. McKenzie, *Authority in the Church* (London, 1966), 30ff.
2. 'Paul was concerned [here] with gifts and functions rather than with persons and their status' (C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* [London, 1968], 295). It would equally serve my point if the 'apostles, prophets, and teachers' are not functions within the local congregation, but ministries within the wider church, and thus itinerant ministries; cf R. P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation* (Grand Rapids, 1984), 31f.
3. It is sometimes urged that the first three terms are to be distinguished from the others in being terms for the person rather than the ministry; but this argument fails in the light of the parallels, Eph. 4:11 where all the terms are personal, and Rom. 12:6f, where they are all impersonal.
4. The sociological term is Max Weber's; see, for example, the chapter 'Charisma: Its Revolutionary Character and its Transformation', in N. Birnbaum and G. Lenzer (eds), *Sociology and Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), 184–96, summarizing his statements in his *Economy and Society* (1922).
5. M. H. Shepherd, 'Elder in the NT', *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, 1962), 2, 73–75 (73).