

The Office and Function of the Baptist Ministry.

A paper read before the Rawdon Brotherhood Conference.

IT cannot be said that writers on ecclesiastical and theological subjects have ever neglected the subject of the ministry. There is a great library of books dealing with this theme. There is no dearth of writings which examine the New Testament conception of ministry, while most of our popular and successful preachers at one time or another feel called upon to issue in book form their impressions on this subject. Again and again this very topic has been carefully treated by speakers from the Baptist Union platform: as far back as 1868 Dr. Landels gave an address on "Ministerial Failures," and we have had speeches on "Education for the Ministry," "Spiritual Life among the Ministers," "Ministerial Apprenticeship," "The Ministry of Power," "The Ministerial Life," "The Prophetic Ministry," "The Priestly Ministry," "The Minister as Theologian," and so on. This means that the topic is a continually recurring one, and there can be no doubt that this recurrence is a very healthy sign. It means that topics like Sustentation, Settlement, Annuity Funds, important though they are, are not the only subjects of interest to us. It means that we are concerned, from time to time, to examine the real meaning of our work, to estimate as truly as we can our real efficiency in the Church, and to discover once again the deep secrets of consecrated service. It is in this spirit, I hope, that the Brotherhood Committee have chosen our topic for this morning, and, as far as I am concerned, it is in this spirit that we shall proceed to consider it. When Baptist ministers meet together to think about the Office and Function of the Baptist ministry, they will echo that noble prayer of Robert Louis Stevenson:

"Be patient still: suffer us yet awhile longer; . . . with our broken purposes of good, with our idle endeavours against evil, suffer us yet awhile longer to endure and (if it may be) help us to do better."

I think we may begin by making certain assumptions. We may presuppose a general agreement with that article in the

Constitution of the Baptist Union which was adopted by the Assembly on April 24, 1923 :

“ Affirming the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the obligation resting on them to fulfil their vocation according to the gift bestowed upon them.

“ By the Ministry we mean an office within the Church of Christ (not a sacerdotal order) conferred through the call of the Holy Spirit and attested by a particular or local Church.”

But while agreeing with this general statement, we shall feel inclined to linger over certain points in it. There is first of all that important sentence, “ By the Ministry we mean an office within the Church of Christ (not a sacerdotal order).” We repudiate for our ministry all priestly claims that cannot with equal validity be applied to our laymen : if we are going to speak about priesthood at all, then we say that every believer is a priest. At least that is the usually accepted interpretation of our doctrine. But in recent years there seems to have been some attempt to modify this view. Letters have appeared in the *Baptist Times* which try to make some real and vital distinction between a minister and a layman, a special point of difference emerging, for example, in the matter of the Communion Service. It is felt by some that there should be something in the minister, as such, that fits him better than a layman, to administer the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. It is not, as far as I can judge, that our ministers want to appropriate to themselves any sacerdotal superiority : it is rather a reaction from that impoverished conception of the minister which, as Dr. Whitley once put it, hardly discriminates his position from that of a school teacher, valued for his character and ability, but liable to dismissal at three months’ notice. It is, of course, a very laudable ambition to make our conception of the ministry a dignified one, to invest it with as much authority as possible. But it is surely a mistake to seek for either dignity or authority in any considerations of an external character. Dignity and authority, we hold, belong to a minister, not because we address him as the Reverend, or because he adopts a special cut in his suit or a special shape in his collars, not because a certain man may have placed hands upon him and repeated a certain formula : dignity and authority belong to him only by virtue of his spiritual consecration to the service of Christ. And if this be the qualification, there is nothing to prevent a layman, of appropriate spirituality, taking the minister’s place in the administration of the Sacraments of the Church. This does not mean, of course, that we shall regard it as altogether indifferent whether a minister or a layman administer the Sacraments. It will always be acknowledged that it is in

the interests of order and effectiveness that he should preside at the Lord's Table whom special opportunities and special experience have fitted for the performance of those solemn duties. Nothing but chaos would result if we were to proceed on the principle that anybody can administer the Sacraments just as well as the minister. That is not our position. We hold that a minister is unfitted for the administration of the Sacraments if he is not spiritually fitted: the same remark applies to a layman. But we also say that both may take an honourable place at the Lord's Table if their own personal spiritual fitness is also attested by the considered judgment of the Church.

A further point which demands notice is the statement:

"the ministry is an office conferred through the call of the Holy Spirit and attested by a particular Church."

There is first of all the subjective element . . . the sense of vocation in the mind of a candidate: this, in our theory, is safeguarded by the corporate and external element . . . the voice of the Church. In this way it seems as though we had attained a really safe conception where private notions may be balanced by the more mature thought of the community. But the difficulty is, that in practice these two factors taken together do not always guarantee a valid call to the ministry. A man may honestly have felt the call, a particular Church may have signified its confirmation of that call . . . and yet both may have made a mistake. Have we not known cases of men who, at a period in their life have retired from the ministry, feeling that after all they were not really fitted? And yet these men, by our theory, seemed to be valid ministers, for according to their own solemn conclusion they had received the call of the Holy Spirit and a particular Church had attested that call. But in spite of their own view, and the view of the Church, they later found that they had made a mistake. There is, therefore, always an incalculable element in a man's entry into the ministry. Whether the call be a valid one or not can be decided only by the manner and the results of our functioning. Here, as in most places, it is the case that "by their fruits ye shall know them."

And so we may say that, from our particular point of view this morning, the more important word in the title of this paper is the word "function." Many of us prefer that word to the word "office": its connotation is at once deeper and wider. As a term it is instinct with life, with activity. We speak, for example, of the functions of the body . . . the nutritive function, by which an organism is enabled to live and grow and maintain its individuality . . . the reproductive function, by which the perpetuation of the species is maintained . . . the functions of correlation, by which the outer world is brought into relation with

the organism, and the organism is enabled to act upon the outer world. It might be valuable to take these three physical illustrations of the term "function" and apply them to our work. (1) Nutritive . . . how suggestive the thought that our business is to grow and maintain our individuality: (2) reproductive . . . how important to perpetuate a succession of men who shall be ministers of the Gospel: (3) correlative . . . how necessary to get into relations with the outer world and establish contact with life and its manifold problems. The application cannot be pressed too far, but when broadly applied, it is certainly suggestive.

The *function* of the Baptist Ministry: this is the crux of the whole matter.

Now it is around this conception of the function of the ministry that a great many problems gather. From our entry into College until our last days in the service of the Church we are concerned, or at least ought to be concerned, with this question: What are the conditions of the proper and adequate exercise of the ministerial function? Some time ago there was published an article about the ministry in a most unlikely magazine—*Cassell's Magazine of Fiction*. It was entitled, "Living up to my Halo," and the sub-title was, "An intimate view of a Minister's Private Life." And the article began as follows:

"Have you noticed something very strange about the saints we see in pictures? They all wear conspicuous halos round their heads, and seem not to mind. It is as if it were altogether pleasant and comfortable to be marked as a saint, whereas anybody who tries it will think differently. I know, because I happen to have a halo of my own—a professional ministerial halo that bids people write 'Reverend' before my name, and respect my 'cloth.' . . .

"In the presence of a hushed congregation men laid their hands on my head and set me apart to be a minister of God. Ever after something sacred was to attach itself, not only to my daily business and its responsibilities, but to my very self. My arms were to welcome little children . . . my hands were to break the bread of the Sacrament. My lips were to speak the words that bind men and women in holy wedlock, that lay the dead to rest beneath the sod, and that proclaim the glories of the life everlasting. . . . I, a crude beginner in the ministry, was to wear a halo!"

Now beneath the humour of this article, a humour both of content and of language, there lay a very serious idea, namely, that the ministry is something concerned with an ideal, that it bears a relation to solemn and holy things. And the problem for the writer of the article was the problem of attaining his ideal, of living up to the high standard . . . the problem he expressed in

the semi-humorous way, "Living up to my Halo." That problem is *our* problem . . . that we may be able to function adequately and gloriously in the organic life of the Kingdom of God.

The adequate performance of our ministerial function demands the careful and constant culture of our own life. We may assume as needing no emphasis in a meeting of this kind habits of devotion, the cultivation of the inner life, the frequent and humble bending before the Holy Shrine. But the careful culture necessary for our work carries us beyond this in the direction of all-round mental equipment. On this point there is, at the present time, a difference of opinion. There are two schools of thought . . . or, perhaps, we ought to say, one school of thought, and another distinguished by the lack of it. A fairly prominent layman in London was speaking of the call of a certain young minister to a pastorate. He said: "This young man has not had a college training . . . and I think it a good thing that he hasn't." There are still, we regret to say, a number of people in our Churches who are suspicious of our college training. They talk glibly of the sufficiency of the call of the Spirit. . . . "That is what we want," they say, "a man who feels called of God . . . then he will preach the old Gospel." There is something very subtle and very sinister in that point of view. It is the point of view that confuses ready citation of texts with true knowledge of the Bible, that confuses eloquence in prayer with real devotional power, that confuses volubility with sincere preaching ability. And it is a confusion that is justified neither by the New Testament nor by the history of preaching, nor by the needs of our day. Nothing can justify it. How dare any man, who really believes that the Spirit of God has called him to this service, do anything else than place upon the altar *all* his talents and powers . . . and those talents not in state of moribund decay but in a condition of increasing development? I sometimes wish that our Calvinists would remember the deep and wide culture of Calvin, that our men who revere C. H. Spurgeon would sometimes read his lectures to his students. The evangelical stalwarts of our Church were not men who allowed the sense of Divine Call to discount the need for continual culture. The call to preach is a call to think. The call to the ministry is a call to mental and moral discipline. And surely, of all callings, ours should be the best equipped. This is not necessarily a matter of academic distinction, for every graduate knows that his real culture, the finest fruits of his mental discipline, appear generally when the day of examinations is over. But many of us will never cease to thank God that from the beginning we were encouraged to pass examinations. They never did, and never will, take the place of real consecration . . . but do you not remember how

those examinations, and the preparation for them, opened up to you avenues along which your minds have continually wandered ever since? There are very few men who can afford to dispense with the discipline of careful and guided study: there are no men who can afford to do without the wider outlook and the more richly-stored mind that such study brings. I shall not say anything about our ministry in the past: our problem is the ministry that is to be, and that part of our *own* ministry which lies before us. We must gain the respect of those who know us and listen to us. We must work for the day when of every Baptist minister it can be said, "he is a careful steward of his time," when, for example, the boys and girls of our congregations will give to us, as teachers of religious truth, a respect at least equal to that which they pay to their teachers in the schools. Is this asking too much? It is the very least we can do, if we believe that the function of the ministry is noble and dignified and sacred.

Further, the adequate performance of our ministerial function demands a straight aim for our objective. But what is our objective? Again, there is difference in the answers to this question. One man, with his eyes on Spurgeon, will say that the true aim of the minister is to preach and live for the conversion of men and women, for the saving of souls. Another, with his eyes on McLaren, will strive to become a careful and helpful expositor of Scripture. Another, with his eyes on Jowett, will devote himself purely to the gracious and winsome ministry of the Word. Yet another, with his eyes on Clifford, will range over the whole area of human problems, social, economic, and political, and will endeavour to preach and practice a social gospel. Now all these particular emphases do less than justice to the great names adduced, for if we enquire carefully into the matter we shall find that all these great preachers had other sides to their ministry than those which made them particularly famous.

There is something very attractive in the suggestion that our ministry should be as broad as possible, that we should endeavour to express the teaching of Christ in every avenue of human life and thought. It is, I think, this attraction which encourages many of the younger ministers of to-day to engage in social and political activities, or, if they do not openly so engage, to give to their public ministry a distinctively social and economic flavour. It is known to many of us how sometimes this policy has wrecked Churches. And whenever this happens, it is easy to lay the blame on the Church, and to say that Church members of a particular kind are not alive to the demands of the social gospel. But we are not so sure that all the blame lies at the door of the Church. Is it not possible that the conservatism of so many of our people arises, not from any lack of sympathy with the aims

and methods of the so-called social gospel, but rather from a sense of what is the true and vital function of the ministry? It has been suggested that ministers may have so many objectives that they may spend their time missing them all. Everybody will admit that, at the present time, we have rather an overplus of organisations. We are in danger of having too many meetings. In London, for example, a minister has not merely his own meetings within his own Church: in addition he must take some account of meetings in his own suburb, meetings within his Group, and meetings of the London Baptist Association. This is to leave out all the other organisations—League of Nations Union, Temperance organisations, societies for the Promotion of Public Morality, with all their attendant committees. Now of every one of these organisations we can say with truth, "this is a valuable thing." But the important question we have to answer is: how far can we, as ministers, engage in all these things? Some men delight in them all, and appear to flourish on them. But we can legislate only for the average minister: it is the average minister doing his duty faithfully on whom the success or failure of the work depends. What shall we say of ourselves in this connection?

May I say that the view to which I have been strongly drawn of late is this: the time seems to have come for the Church, led by her ministry, to narrow somewhat the range of her activities. This will appear to be a desertion of the modern movement, and in direct opposition to the modern trend, but it has been strongly impressed on my own mind by the fact that in all our Churches the multiplicity of attractions is making it increasingly difficult to cultivate either private or public devotion and lay the foundations of spiritual life. Our Churches would all be improved by more attention to prayer, the study of the Bible, and the private and individual cure of souls. This may sound "old-fashioned," but on this point the "old-fashioned people" are surely right. This is the *specific* thing we have to do: if we as Churches do not do it, it will not be done. We do not mean in any way to disparage attention to social and economic issues: we are not blind to the broader implications of our Gospel, indeed, the full application of the Christian spirit to every sphere of social activity is one of the pressing needs of our time. But there is one thing that cannot be excused, the failure to foster the spiritual life of the people committed to our charge. In an address from the Chair of the Congregational Union, Dr. J. D. Jones made a great plea for preaching, and preaching which centred on the central things. He spoke out of a deep and mature experience, and as far as we can judge all experienced ministers say the same thing. It is a very significant thing that at the end of his life

Dr. Clifford, *the* man amongst us who more than any had fought the battles of the press and the platform, who had entered into the dusty arena of political and social reform, should counsel us to go in for what he called Personal Evangelism. And, coming from him, such counsel meant just the narrowing of our range, and at the same time, the deepening of it.

And, after all, within this narrower sphere, there is room for all our breadth. A man does not necessarily become narrow because he restricts the range of his activities. The faithful minister can say: "My sphere is primarily my own Church: my own Church means men and women eager for spiritual help as well as instruction: it means young people who need culture in *every part of their life*. And although I restrict my sphere to my Church there is not a faculty I possess that is not continually called upon." Our direct objective is the claiming of all our people, young and old, for Christ. In many cases this means a direct effort for conversion . . . and let us not be afraid either of the word, or of the thing it means. In other cases it means constant encouragement to deeper consecration. In all cases it means the constant and faithful pastoral and teaching ministry. The contest against sin in this world is fought along a far-flung battle line, but *for us*, the point of operations is the Church which has called us to its ministry. Paul told the Ephesians that Christ loved the Church. A Baptist minister should be second to none in his love for the Church. A love for the Church, a belief in the Church, a pride in the great record of her history in spite of all the blemishes . . . these seem to be essential for the inward equipment of the faithful minister.

A ministry thus conceived, in its nature and its function, has no need to be ashamed. We are on sure ground when we impose on all who perform the ministerial function the ultimate test of spirituality. We need not apologise for our orders. We need no re-ordination. Our concern is not so much ordination, as the faithful living of the long days that follow it. Bishop Barnes, preaching at Westminster some time ago, is reported to have said: "The true Christian idea is that for due order certain men should be set apart as ministers to perform the highest acts of congregational worship; yet, if a layman commissioned by the congregation should perform such acts, we should deem his conduct irregular, but certainly not spiritually void. It is then impossible in the light of the New Testament to unchurch the great Non-conformist communions of to-day" . . . a very significant admission, coming from the lips of a distinguished Anglican. Our entry into the ministerial function, as compared with that of a Roman or Anglican priest, may lack a certain stately ritual and an elaborate appeal to the eye: but it is no wise lacking in

New Testament validity. It is rich in noble precedent: it has been hallowed by the faithful following of a great and sturdy race of Free Churchmen who have laid the whole world under obligation by that heritage of spiritual freedom which they so effectively bequeathed. And in this age, an age of increasing restlessness, when so many are searching for that which has roots and touches reality, when man are more and more to be judged by their personal character rather than by their claims to authority, who shall say that there is not a great need for that witness which *we* are especially called to bear? Everything depends, humanly speaking, on our adequate equipment for our work, and upon our continued loyalty, not only to the best traditions of the past, but also to the best thought of the present, and whatever the future may have to reveal to minds that are unfettered and open to the light on every side.

F. TOWNLEY LORD.

WILBRAHAM AND MELBOURN General Baptist churches were approached in November 1654 by the Fenstanton church; Anthony Grey of Thaxfield was then Elder of the latter church, which frequently met at Royston. In 1672 Benjamin Metcalf took a licence for his house at Melbourn, and Edward Hancock was licensed to preach at John Dennis's house in Wilbraham. After 1689 there were supplies, including John Lacy, apparently of Spalding. In 1711 John Catlin certified his house in Gold Street, Wilbraham, and opening services were conducted by Jemmett, of Dunning's Alley in London. Other leaders were John Goring, Edward Elgar, Michael Harding, Simon Martin. Other centres were Melbourn, Fulbourn, Saffron Walden. The church was strongly orthodox. In 1720 Scarlet Moody and Charles Hapgood succeeded Harding and Martin as Elders. Catlin died 1723, Hapgood in 1733. James Eades came from London to Walden, and in 1740 was ordained with Benjamin Barron to the Walden-Melbourn group, while Fulbourn was cared for by Moody since 1736. Barron died 1741, but Thomas Barron succeeded in 1757, a year before Moody's death. Charles Parmen from Headingham took charge of Fulbourn till 1764, and after Eades died in 1769, the whole group re-united under Thomas Barron, assisted by Christopher Payne from Chesham. In 1805 the church had joined the New Connexion.