

The Office of Lay Reader.

I.

ITS HISTORY AND PRESENT-DAY USE.

THE Reader is happy in being able to count his Master Christ as his great Exemplar. He remembers that in those golden days when the Son of Man went about doing good upon the earth He entered the synagogue at Nazareth, received the roll at the hands of the minister and read and expounded a passage from the prophecy of Isaiah. It is not, he knows well, for him to speak as never man spake, but he hopes by the grace of God that it may be permitted to him to make men's hearts burn within them while he opens to them the Scriptures and declares the things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.

In the very early days of the Church it is not improbable that the Reader was one who could read the Old Testament Scriptures in Aramaic and translate them into the vernacular. Thus he occupied the place of teacher, the last of the gifts of Christ enumerated by St. Paul in Ephesians iv. 11: "He gave some to be apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering." But the essential characteristic of the Reader is the prophetic gift, that is the *charisma* with which he is endowed; it is by the exercise of this that he must justify his existence. The Church is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. ii. 20), and the Reader must make his contribution as a member of that godly fellowship. The liberty of prophesying permitted in apostolic times, however, was soon curtailed, hedged in with rules, set in a rigid system of orders of ministry, declining from the glorious company of the apostles to a place after the Exorcists with the doorkeepers, widows and afflicted persons (Wordsworth, J., *The Ministry of Grace*, p. 178). That Readers were once placed before the Deacons and later relegated to a position not only after them, but also after the Sub-deacons, Acolytes and Exorcists, is not perhaps evidence of the degeneration of the Reader so much as of the concentration of the Church of those days upon matters of ritual and discipline rather than upon those gifts of the Spirit

which maintain and renew the open vision. The prophetic gift like St. Paul's apostleship comes not from men, neither through man, but through Jesus Christ Himself. The exercise of the gift is subject to rule, that is why there is an Order of Readers and Regulations for the direction of its members, but the call is from God, and because of that it is incumbent upon those in authority to be diligent in examining candidates for the office of Reader and to be satisfied of their inward call before proceeding to their election. A lay ministry is of necessity prophetic, but this does not render it independent of institutional sanction. The gifts are gifts of the Spirit, but authority to exercise them in the congregation is bestowed by the Church. This is not to belittle the gifts or even to hinder their exercise, it is to regulate their exercise in public.

In the Eastern Church the office and work of Reader are very much the same now as in early times, but in the Western Church up to the time of the Reformation the office of Reader, like that of the Deacon among ourselves, became little more than one of a group of offices through which a candidate for the priesthood must pass before receiving Holy Orders.

The practical supersession of the office of Reader in the West was doubtless one result of the ever-growing tendency to concentrate learning and power in the clerical order. By this means ability of all kinds gravitated naturally towards the priesthood, and it was not till Francis of Assisi gathered lay people together for religious work that any real position in the religious world was possible to ordinary people outside the ranks of the clergy. The Friars, as their name (*Frères, Fratres*) tells us, were Brothers, not Fathers, though even with them it fell out before very long that the more prominent were ordained to the priesthood, thus concealing the Brother in the Father. Members of the Third Order, however, are lay people living in the world and keeping alive the sense of religious vocation.

With the Reformation the revival of the Reader was speedily demanded by the difficulties of the time and especially by the shortage of clergy. Dr. W. H. Frere, in *A History of the English Church, 1558-1625*, says, p. 108: "To meet the needs of the desolate parishes, and perhaps also to supply in some respects the place of the minor orders, a body of 'readers' was called into being at the early ordinations of the restored hierarchy (Jan. 7, 1559/60)."

These "readers" were placed in charge of districts under an incumbent. The rules issued for their guidance by Archbishop Parker provided among other things that they should not minister the sacraments or other public rites of the Church, but bury the dead and purify women after childbirth. Their work was restricted to poor parishes destitute of incumbents, except in time of sickness or for other good reasons satisfactory to the Ordinary.

They were to read the service appointed plainly, distinctly and audibly, that all the people may hear and understand. They promised also that they would read daily at the least one chapter of the Old Testament and one of the New for their own private edification and instruction.

In this way many parishes which would otherwise have been entirely destitute of spiritual ministrations were provided with regular services in the Church, the necessary offices of the churching of women and the burial of the dead were performed, house-to-house visitation was maintained, as also the catechizing of children. No doubt the incumbent visited the district when he could, ministering baptism and communion, but the daily and weekly routine of Church work was carried on by the "reader." By and by, however, nonconformists and separatists became active and even menacing; their meetings for Bible reading and prayer degenerated into conventicles and were denounced as "prophesyings." Even the mild Richard Hooker was constrained to remark upon the Reader of the Temple as preaching a different doctrine to that which he conceived to be the true teaching of the Church of England, so that "The forenoon sermon spake Canterbury; and the afternoon Geneva" (Walton's Lives). The ordained Reader, such as Mr. Walter Travers, who sought to impose Genevan doctrine and practice upon the Church of England and limited his ministry almost entirely to preaching, brought the licensed "reader," who was a layman authorized to perform a strictly limited ministry, into disrepute. So that although there is evidence of the ministry of "readers" till about the middle of the eighteenth century in the Westmorland dales, their general use was abandoned by Parker and more definitely by Whitgift by the end of the sixteenth century. This was partly because Church finance, and affairs generally, were put on a more satisfactory basis and partly also because of the abuses consequent upon such Readerships as that of the Temple being held by clergy-

men who were in effect Nonconformist preachers who refused to read the Liturgy of the Church of England.

In the forties and fifties of last century the Church of England once more realized her incapacity to carry on her work by means of men in holy orders alone and turned once more to a ministry of laymen. The great champion of this revival in those days was the Archdeacon of London, the Ven. W. H. Hale, who published between 1850 and 1864 an *Essay, a Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury and four Charges*, all dealing with the work of the ministry and pointing forward to a revival of a permanent diaconate compatible with a secular calling, or failing that to the office of lay reader. In his Charge of 1853 he wrote:—

“Whenever the question of the formal and authorized restoration of the lesser Orders in our Church shall come under consideration, it may possibly appear desirable to revive not only the Order of Sub-deacons, but also that of Reader, and to bring our Church to uniformity, in this particular, rather with the Eastern than with the Western Church. But whether the ministry be strengthened by one or two Orders, in either case a form of Ordination would be required. To devise such a form would not be difficult, if we adhere to the fundamental principles of our own Ordinal. . . . It would be out of place to set forth more particularly the details connected with this subject. But I must not omit to mention one point, which will demand the most anxious consideration, namely, whether the member of a lower Order should be required to forsake every worldly employment; and whether the admission to that Order should be considered as a vow of perpetual obligation, compelling the recipient to continue in his ministrations to the end of his life. Whatever duties may be confided to them, the Church ought to take care that they are duly qualified, in respect of learning as well as character and conduct; and if, for the lesser Orders, the standard of learning were this, such a knowledge of Scripture and of theology as is attainable by persons who are not acquainted with the ancient languages, the want of those higher attainments, which are now by our Canons required from persons admitted to Holy Orders, would be the barrier which would be brought to prevent persons in the lesser Orders from seeking the higher places in the Ministry.”

These wise words bear repetition now when we are again faced with grave difficulties in maintaining even the legal services in some of our parish churches and when work in some of our district churches and mission rooms must be abandoned if none but persons in Holy Orders are to be regarded as competent to carry them on.

Archdeacon Hale's work bore fruit and in 1866 the office of Reader was revived among us, and in 1889 the present division into Diocesan and Parochial Readers was agreed upon by the Convocations of Canterbury and York. The conditions under which Readers in these Provinces work now are set out shortly in the model *Regu-*

lations respecting Readers and other Lay Officers issued by the Archbishops in 1905. These have been adopted by most of the dioceses of England and Wales with such modifications as seemed desirable to meet local conditions.¹ Within the limits of this paper it is not possible to say anything of the practice outside the Church as by law established. That establishment imposes a good many restrictions, and in the freer ecclesiastical atmosphere of America, the Colonies and the Mission Field, the bishops are at liberty to consider the needs of the Church and the qualifications for ministry without regarding Acts of Uniformity or other legal enactments made to safeguard vested interests. They are free to determine their practice by principle rather than by precedent.

We are less free, but we are not powerless. Much may be done, and doubtless in the near future much will be done, to utilize the services of devout and competent laymen not merely on Boards of Finance, but in the services of the sanctuary. So far as lay people are concerned in this matter some must qualify themselves for this high and holy work, but all must believe in the prophethood of the laity and by consequence be willing to accept at the hands of the Bishop the services of any of the people of God, whether lay or clerical, seeing that both are endowed with the Spirit and both are duly commissioned by the Church. Then our pastors and masters will thank God that the Lord's people have learned at last that the Church is not an institution established and maintained to provide religious services, but a society, every member of which is pledged to religious service, and they will take courage to send forth laymen to witness to the reality of the Spirit-bearing Body. For those who are sent the words of the Bishop's blessing, after admitting a Reader, may be commended as a prayer to all men of good will: "The Lord give thee wisdom, courage, strength and love to do His will now and for evermore."

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¹ The duties of a Parochial Reader may include all or any of the following: to visit the sick, to read and pray with them, to take classes in Sunday School or elsewhere and generally to give such assistance to the Incumbent as he may lawfully direct; in unconsecrated buildings used for public worship he may read such Services as may be approved by the Bishop, expound the Scriptures and give addresses; and in consecrated buildings read such portions of Morning and Evening Prayer and Litany as are specified in his Licence, to read selected and approved homilies or sermons, to catechise children outside the appointed Services of the Church. The Commission of a Diocesan Reader may include all the duties of a Parochial Reader with the addition of leave to give addresses in a consecrated building.