

WHAT IS CHRISTIAN MINISTRY? AND WHAT NOT?

WE are charged with rejecting Christian ministry. To this the short reply is, that we reject nothing but *un-Christian* ministry.

I do not believe that persons appointed by the Sovereign, or chosen by the people, are therefore ministers. This is the point in question. I disclaim the title of either to choose or appoint them, or of any but God. But I believe Christian ministry to be as essential to this dispensation as the fact of Christ's coming. So far am I from setting it aside, that I believe it to be essentially from God, and object to the perversion of it, or the mere will of king or people (though both are to be respected in their place) interfering with so holy a thing. I read, that when Christ ascended up on high, "He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." This is the only source of ministry, not the appointment of a king, nor the choice of a people. I see it, on the one side, asserted, that authorities have a right to appoint; and, on the other, that the people have a right to choose: I do not believe either. Christ gives when and how He pleases: woe be to those who do not own it! In a little tract called "The Protestant Dissenter's Manual," it is stated that a man has as much right to choose his own minister as his own lawyer or physician.

This seems to shut out God altogether, just as much as what is objected to. If Christ has given a gift, the saint is bound to own its use, and Christ's word by it.

Where is the proof of an evangelist's gift? In the converted souls which bless God through his means. The church may own and recognise him in it; they must do so if they are spiritual—if the gift, and therefore the appointment of God, be there: they sin against Christ who has sent him, if they do not. The consequence of these human appointments or choosings has been the fixing of a person who pleased the patron or people, fit or unfit, as the one only person in whom every gift must be concentrated, or the church lose part of its inheritance and portion. And the whole service has been turned habitually into a preacher.

We do not object to ministry, but to the assumption of the whole of it by one individual, who may or may not be sent; and if he have one qualification, yet not all. A man may be eminently qualified for an evangelist, and he is made a pastor, for which he is in no way fitted. He is qualified to teach perhaps but not to rule, and he is put to guide the flock. It is the substitution of a minister, good or bad, for the whole work of the ministry, of which we complain. The dislocation of the frame of Christ's body is the consequence. What is the Home Mission, and the Presbyterian Mission, and the like, but the effort to correct this plainly-seen nuisance in the framework of these bodies which call themselves churches?

The reason I say that ministry is essential to this dispensation, is the declaration in 2 Cor. v., "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (more correctly, "and put in us," &c.): *i.e.*, God in Christ was doing these three things—reconciling the world, not imputing trespasses, and committing ministry. This was essentially part of the work of God manifest in the flesh, the manner in which He was revealed. Amongst the Jews it was not so; they were a formed people by birth, and had a certain code of laws prescribed to them as such. But when God was in Christ, being a reconciling God, a ministry was necessarily the way of fulfilling this very purpose.

Thus ministry was the distinctive character of the dispensation, essentially characteristic of it. The grace of this may be amazingly concentrated, as it was in the apostle; it is habitually distributed in various competencies of service. These are for use; and the church is bound to own them, or it denies Christ's title in committing them, which is as real and essential to Him as the power in which He was reconciling and could forgive and not impute trespasses. Any one who is reconciled is competent to state, and is bound, as far as able, to state Christ's glory as the reconciler to them who are ignorant. There are those who may have the special gift of evangelising. The church of course is not the place for this, ordinarily speaking, for they are

the church because they have received the gospel. No one has the smallest right to speak in the church to whom God has not given a competency to *edify* 17. The flesh has no right there, it is dead in Christ. Out of Him it is dead in trespasses and sins; its right is only everlasting destruction. I know no right that a rebellious sinner has but to be lost: a saint has none—he is bought with a price. Christ has all rights and all power too. Neither has grace any right to speak there, unless for the edification of the brethren. If they are edified, they will soon find it out; if not, it proves the incompetency of the speaker, let him be as wise as the prince of Tyre (Ezek. xxviii.); for the Spirit always speaks to the profit of those to whom He speaks.

It is true there may be so evil a state as that men will not endure sound doctrine. But for this there is no remedy but the direct intervention of prerogative mercy in sending some one able to bring them back.

The church then has a right to the profit of all the ministry with which God has endowed any of the brethren for its edification. Those who cannot do so must of course be silent; for it is God who alone can profit, and He will shew His prerogative by giving it by whom He pleases. If any one be exceedingly fitted of the Lord in knowledge and wisdom, in affectionate and watchful discerningness of the state of souls, and in ability to minister the right remedy in Christ—to control the unruly in the manifested power and energy of the Spirit of God, to detect the devices of Satan—his

value in feeding the flock of God will soon be felt. The godly part of the church would soon be apt to cling too much, rather than too little, to such an one for guidance, comfort, and support.

He who has a gift is bound to exercise it according to the measure given to him, whether locally or more extendedly. If any one be able, with much gift from God, rightly to divide the word of truth, though he may not have such qualifications as previously spoken of, he may teach with as much of profit or more even than the other, yet not hold the same place of service among the brethren : he may have a word of wisdom, though not of knowledge, or the converse. The church is entitled to all. Whatever God gave, He gave to the church to profit withal : how shall we get it, if it be not exercised ? That Christ will demand the account of the talent is certain. But there is much more gained than merely the exercise of whatever gifts God may give ; for, the Spirit of God being owned, the power of communion is there, and, the Spirit of God being honoured, blessing accompanies all in the power of grace and communion otherwise unknown.

We quite acknowledge then Christian ministry ; but not that it is altogether in the hands of those who would thus confine it to a single individual, whatever his extent of qualification. There may be persons who have a constant gift of a given character ; and it is their duty to exercise it : a word of profit might be given to any at any time. If there are those who are experienced

through divine grace in the guidance and governance of the church, the saints, guided of God's Spirit, will be in subjection for their own profit; yea, all will be subject one to another. Where the spirit of grace and love is, all will be well; where not, it will surely be ill, unless the Lord in mercy interfere by sending some one able to control the unruly and convince the gain-sayers. The Lord will surely afford for the church all that is needful for its good, though He may, for our profit, keep us waiting very closely upon Him for this, and thus teach us dependence upon Him. If He were looked to, we should have fewer difficulties; for He would act more—perhaps I should say more manifestly—to us.

Further, I add, that while every office or gift is a blessing to the church, and to be fully recognised, it is the clear privilege of any two or three Christians, where not done in the spirit of schism, to meet and break bread together, should they not have any ministry at all or any office whatever. It is their privilege as *Christians*. The rest is their profit of course as saints, and to be gladly welcomed and ministering to the other; but indeed it is no way to be compared with their actual abiding privilege of communion together, their privilege and duty, and substantially the everlasting part of the whole matter. The necessity of a priest for this (for such it in fact comes to) is a mere remnant of the principle of apostacy in the church; though, where there are many saints, those who preside would naturally break the bread, as some one manifestly must.

Public sanction before and by the world is not at all necessary for any office. This is what is called being a clergyman, and is one of the seals and marks of dispensational apostacy—the union of the world and the church, whether in the Establishment or Dissent. If this is what is meant by being a minister, I would utterly disdain and abhor it in such a sense: nature, I am sure, likes it. The authority to minister comes from the competency given of Christ; its recognition by the church is therefore a responsibility which solemnly rests on them. If the Spirit of the Lord be amongst them, He has ever ordered, and ever will order, all things needful for this, and for the expulsion of error. When I speak of authority to minister, it is indeed a deep responsibility to be exercised according to the word, of which Christ will take sure account, and judge our neglect. Any recognition by the church may be all well for itself as to order; it is not what confers competency to minister. Woe be to the church if it owns not what Christ has given! Separation to any special service the Lord may make if He pleases: if He does, He will provide the way Himself in His wisdom; and it will be proved and made good, and, I will add, justified of wisdom's children. It is not necessary for the church's continuous blessing, as is manifest from the history of the church of Antioch.

God works, I trust, though we are feeble and foolish—is working much more deeply and powerfully than the devised order of human arrangements may be able

perhaps to see. May He give us to wait on His time and way for every gift and guidance of His Holy Spirit! His Spirit is sovereign, and will prove Himself so, however men may carve channels to carry the waters safe. Perhaps when they may seem to overflow and break their banks, rich nourishment and unction may be left behind and deposited, while the channel they are so curious about may be found to have but sand and stones at bottom, making their course troubled—their profit and value only when they break through the dikes human wisdom has raised. The Lord, I am persuaded, will order much more blessing than we have yet seen, if we are patient and devoted.

With the fullest liberty then to those whom the Lord has enabled to profit the church, exercised (as in spirit it alone can be) subject to the authority of God in the church, “decently and in order,” we do recognise in the fullest sense a ministry in the use and waiting upon every gift in the service of God, which He has given for the profit and edification of His church. Where God calls any individual, and appropriates any gift to him as such, of course he will be a minister, and is bound to wait upon it. We do not count ourselves perfect in wisdom; but these things we see in Scripture, and believe God is honoured most in His own ways.