

The Ministry of the Church in the Early Centuries

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I

A BACKGROUND STUDY

(1) The Word "Ministry"

The common New Testament term for the ministry is *διακονία*, and along with it we find *διάκονος*, "minister," *ὁ διακονῶν*, "he who ministers," and *διακονεῖν* "to minister." All these words have a very extensive application within the New Testament and are by no means restricted to denote service within the Christian Church. However, when they are restricted to denote service in the Church the words are used in a great variety of meanings: (1) discipleship in general;¹ (2) service rendered to the Church because of the "gifts" bestowed, and hence all kinds of service;² (3) specifically the "ministry of the Word," and most frequently the "apostleship";³ (4) such services as feeding the poor, or organizing and providing the great collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem;⁴ (5) such services as those rendered by Stephanas, Archippus, and Tychicus.⁵

In this discussion we use the term ministry as it refers to those individuals and those groups of individuals who were responsible for both the spiritual and temporal guidance and government of the early Christian communities.

(2) The New Testament Conception of the Ministry as Revealed in the Pastoral Epistles.

¹John 12:26.

²Matt. 20:26; Acts 6:2; Rom. 12:7; I Cor. 12:5.

³Acts 1:17; 20:24; 21:19; Rom. 11:13; Eph. 4:12.

⁴Acts 6:1; 11:29; 12:25; Rom. 15:25; II Cor. 8:4, 19.

⁵I Cor. 16:15; Col. 4:17; Eph. 6:21.

It is in the Pastoral Epistles, and especially in II Timothy, that we find the most about Paul's view of the ministry. In II Tim. 1:6 Paul speaks of the ministerial gift: "Stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands." In II Tim. 1:12-14 the Apostle speaks of two deposits. In verse 12 Paul speaks of "my deposit": "For I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day." Truly this has reference to Paul's own life. The Christian minister is one whose whole life has been committed to God. Then in verse 14 Paul speaks of "the beautiful deposit": "That good thing which was committed unto thee keep it by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us." Undoubtedly, this must mean the Gospel. Christ has handed over to the ministry His glorious Gospel, His Divine message, and ministers are the trustees of so weighty a charge.

In the second chapter of II Timothy Paul describes the varied service of the Christian minister. There are at least these seven aspects under which the ministry is viewed: (1) the minister as a teacher—vs. 2; (2) the minister as a soldier—vs. 3; (3) the minister as a wrestler—vs. 5; (4) the minister as a husbandman—vs. 6; (5) the minister as a workman—vs. 15; (6) the minister as a vessel—vs. 21; (7) the minister as a slave—vs. 24.

In II Tim. 2:24-26 Paul describes both the work of the minister and the way in which it is to be done: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves. . . ."

Then again, in II Tim. 3:14-17 Paul speaks of the relationship of the Christian minister to the Scriptures: "But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; and that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures....All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...."

Finally, just as this last Epistle of Paul closes, he gives his young friend and disciple Timothy several great parting exhortations as watchwords of his ministry (II Timothy. 4:2-5): (1) Preaching—"Preach the word" (2) Soberness—"watch thou in all things" (3) Endurance—"endure afflictions" (4) Evangelization—"do the work of an evangelist" (5) Faithfulness—"make full proof of thy ministry."

II

THE MINISTRY OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN THE FIRST CENTURY

(1) Two Different Kinds of Ministry

We pass now to a more technical study of the ministry in the Christian Church during the early centuries. The earliest fact we have about the organization of the Christian Church is given in Acts 6, where we are told that seven men were appointed to what is called a "ministry of tables," which is distinguished from the "ministry of the word." This distinction between two different kinds of ministry which appears at the very beginning is seen to exist all through the Apostolic Church and beyond it into the Post-Apostolic Age. It can be traced in the Epistles of Paul and in other parts of the New Testament. It is seen in the Didache, in the Pastor of Hermas, in the Epistles of Barnabas, in the Apology of Justin Martyr, in the writings of Irenaeus and elsewhere.

Lindsay speaks thus concerning the distinction between these two kinds of ministry:

The one ministry differs from the other in function, and the distinction depends on a conception to be afterward examined—that of "gifts."

The common name, in apostolic and sub-apostol-

ic literature, for the members of the one kind of ministry is "those who speak the Word of God." Modern writers have called it the charismatic, but perhaps the better term is the prophetic ministry; while to the other class belong all the names which are given to denote office-bearers in the local churches. The two existed side by side. The great practical distinction between them was that the members of the former were in no sense office-bearers in any one Christian community; they were not elected or appointed to any office; they were not set apart for duties by any ecclesiastical ceremony. The "Word" came to them and they were compelled by inward impulsion to speak the message given them to deliver. Some were wanderers; others confined themselves to their own community. They were responsible to no ecclesiastical authority. Churches were encouraged to test them and their message; for the "gift" of discerning whether a so-called prophet spoke a truly Divine message was always presupposed to be within the local church. But once accepted they took a higher place than the office-bearers, they presided at the Lord's Supper, and their judgment in cases of discipline could overbear ordinary ecclesiastical rules.⁹

Out of the other kind of ministry, the "ministry of tables," came, by ordinary development, all the various kinds of ecclesiastical organization which now exist. Its members were office-bearers in the strictest sense of the word; they were selected to do ecclesiastical work in a given community, they were set apart for it in a special way, and they were responsible to the Church for its due performance.

But it is important that while the two kinds of ministries are thoroughly distinct from each other, the same individuals might belong to both kinds. The "prophetic gift" might fall on anyone, private member or office-bearer alike. Office-holding did not prevent the "gift." Polycarp, office-bearer at Smyrna, was a prophet; so was Ignatius of Antioch, and many others. The "gift" of speaking the Word of God was a personal and not an official source of enlightenment.

(2) The Prophetic Ministry

We speak of the "ministry of the Word" as the prophetic ministry. There is a three-fold division in this prophetic ministry.

⁹Lindsay, T. M., Article on *Ministry* in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. III, p. 2057.

There are apostles, prophets and teachers. In noting the distinction between the three classes it may be said that zealous missionary endeavor was the distinguishing characteristic of the first class, exhortation and admonition of the second, and instruction of the third. We can trace this three-fold ministry of the Word of God from the most primitive times down to the end of the second century. Lindsay has this to say concerning this three-fold ministry of the Word:

It existed in the oldest Gentile Christian community, that of Antioch, where a number of prophets and teachers sent forth two apostles from among their own number. Apostles, prophets and teachers are mentioned in the First Epistle to the Corinthians and in the Epistle to the Ephesians. The same three-fold ministry is given in the Pastor of Hermas, which dates about 140 A.D., and in the Psuedo-Clementine Homilies, which can scarcely be earlier than 200 A.D.⁷

a. Apostles

The distinguishing characteristic of an apostle was that he had given himself, and that for life, to be a missionary, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ to those who did not know it. He had received the "gift" of speaking the Word of God. The prophet and the teacher had the same "gift" but they found their sphere of its use within the Christian community, while the apostle's sphere was for the most part outside, among those who were not yet within the Church of Christ.

b. Prophets

Prophets had been the religious guides of Israel of old, and the spirit of prophecy never entirely died out. Jesus Himself promised to send prophets among His followers.⁸ The promise was fulfilled. Christian prophets appeared within the Church from its beginning. Prophecy appeared spontaneously wherever Christianity spread.⁹ From the earliest times down to the close of the second century an uninterrupted stream of prophets and prophetesses

appeared in the Christian Churches. And St. Paul expected the prophetic gift to appear in every Christian community.

Lindsay says this about the nature of prophecy and the work of the prophets:

Prophecy was founded on revelation; the prophets were men especially "gifted" with spiritual intuition and magnetic speech....The prophets spoke as they were moved, and the Spirit worked on them in various ways....While the duty of the apostle was to the unbelievers, Jewish or heathen, the sphere of the activity of the prophet was within the Christian congregation. It was his business to edify the brethren.¹⁰

c. Teachers

The teachers in the Early Church were they who had in a personal way received from the Spirit the "gift" of knowledge, which fitted them to instruct their fellow-believers. Their more public sphere of work was in the meeting for edification;¹¹ but it may be inferred that their work was not limited to public exhortation, and that they devoted time and pains to the instruction of catechumens and others who wished to be more thoroughly grounded in the principles of Christian faith and life.¹²

(3) The Local Ministry

The ministry developing from the "ministry of tables" is known as the local ministry. There were two clearly distinct offices of a local and permanent kind in the New Testament. The first of these officers is designated as elder or presbyter or bishop or pastor. Much has been written concerning whether or not the offices of presbyter and bishop were identical in the Church in the first century. Lightfoot and Lindsay are of the opinion that the two were identical.¹³ On the other hand, Harnack and Hatch believe that the office as well as the name "episcopus" was distinct from that of presbyter from the beginn-

⁷Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, p. 74.

⁸Matt. 10:41; 23:34; Luke 11:49.

⁹Acts 11:27; 15:32; 21:9, 10; Rom. 12:6, 7; I Cor. 14:32, 36, 37; I Thess. 5:20; Gal. 3:3-5.

¹⁰Lindsay, T. M., Article on *Ministry* in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. III, p. 2059.

¹¹I Cor. 14:26.

¹²Gal. 6:6.

¹³Lightfoot, J. B., *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, pp. 196, 197; Lindsay, T. M. *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, p. 163.

ing.¹⁴ The function of the presbyters or bishops in the New Testament Church was, in general, spiritual; but it involved an oversight of all the affairs of the Church as well.

The second of the local officers in the New Testament Church were the deacons. These were the assistants who aided the presbyters or elders in the rule of the congregation. It is a mistaken notion to believe that their work pertained only to the matter of administering the charity of the congregations. Their functions and authority were much more extensive than just that. In a very real sense they were assistant rulers.

Thus, we find in the primitive Christian Church but two orders or grades among the local clergy: elders (presbyters, pastors, overseers) and deacons.

III

THE FALL OF THE PROPHETIC MINISTRY IN THE SECOND CENTURY

Two important changes took place in the Church during the second century. First of all, we note the development of the three-fold ministry. The ruling body of office-bearers in every congregation received a permanent president, who was called the bishop. The change came gradually. It provoked no strong opposition. Thus, by the beginning of the third century there were three grades of ministry; bishop, elder (presbyter) and deacon.

But another change in the ministry in the second century was even more drastic. The prophetic ministry of the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic times gradually passed away in the course of the second century. During the first century the officers of the local Church were subservient to the prophetic ministers; but during the second century the prophetic ministers became subservient to the local office-bearers.

The overthrow of the supremacy of the prophetic ministry was inevitable. The more close and firm the organization of the local Churches became, the less room remained for the exercise of the prophetic

ministry, which in the nature of things claimed at once freedom for itself and the power of ruling in some indefinite way over the Churches which admitted its exercise among them. To use the words of Lindsay:

When the wave of spiritual enthusiasm and illumination which came with the earliest proclamation of the Gospel had somewhat spent itself, there was need to supply through the ordinary office-bearers of the churches that exhortation and instruction which in the earliest times had been left to the inspiration of those gifted with the power of speaking the Word of God. . . . When once the local churches began to have their spiritual needs satisfied within their own circle and the bands of association grew stronger, it is easy to imagine that the power of the office-bearers grew strong enough to withstand the members of the prophetic ministry unless the prophets were content to take a secondary place. The very fact that the office-bearers could render the service of the prophets and teachers inevitably tended to place them, the permanent officials of the local churches, permanently in the position of the exhorters, instructors, and leaders of the public worship of the communities.¹⁵

The causes of this fall of the prophetic ministry may be summarized as follows:

(1) The need for some authority to express the dogmatic unity of the Church, and the idea that this authority lay in the office-bearers of the Churches.

(2) A change of moral and intellectual atmosphere within the Church in an effort to accommodate as much as possible the Church to the conditions of existing society in order to justify the plea that Christians were entitled to the toleration extended to all other religions.

(3) The gradual deterioration of the prophetic ministry.

IV

SIGNIFICANT CHANGES IN THE MINISTRY IN THE THIRD CENTURY

(1) The Rise of the Priesthood and the Growth of the Hierarchy

During the third century there are clear traces of a general change in the way of thinking of the Church and of the relation

¹⁴Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, pp. 365-377.

¹⁵Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, pp. 215, 216.

of the ministry to the Church. This is commonly spoken of as the change of the ministry into a mediating priesthood, standing between the people and God. However, as Lindsay points out:

The idea that the ministry is a priesthood was there, but the main thought was much more the power of the priest than his mediation.¹⁶

In the third decade of the third century Calixtus, the Bishop of Rome, and the Roman Church asserted that the Church, through its office-bearers, was entitled to proclaim God's pardon for any sins, however heinous, due signs of sorrow being accepted by the office-bearers as sufficient. This change met with the fierce opposition of Tertullian and Hippolytus.

This new doctrine of penance inevitably led the people to regard the office-bearers of the Church, and especially the bishops, as if they were in God's place, and it ascribed to the bishops the power of actually pardoning and not simply of proclaiming the pardon of God.

On the other hand, the Church lost its old idea that it was the company of the saints; and the new feeling grew that the Church was the institution within which God had placed the means of acquiring holiness, and that these means were at the disposal of the bishops or the heads of the Christian communities, and could be reached only through them. Hence the office-bearers, and more especially the bishops—the men who had already been declared to be the guardians of the essential Christian verities—now came to be regarded also as the keepers or guardians of that peace of God which comes from the pardon of sin. Thus, we have the beginning of the priestly hierarchy.

(2) The Doctrine of Apostolic Succession

This new theory of the position and authority of the office-bearers in the Christian Churches was so novel, and so opposed to the old traditions of primitive Christianity, that an extraordinary sanction was needed to support it, and in the nature of

things the sanction had to come down from the earliest days of the Christian Church. It is here that the idea of an Apostolic Succession, in the modern Roman and Anglican sense, first makes its appearance.

Lindsay makes the following comments about this doctrine of Apostolic Succession:

It is a conception which had its origin in the brains of leaders of the Roman Church, and although it was adopted and defended by Cyprian, it has never ceased to be associated with the Roman claims and to fit most naturally into Roman theories. To understand it one must remember, what is continually forgotten, that the great men who built up the Western Church were almost all trained Roman lawyers.... Apostolic succession, in the dogmatic sense of that ambiguous term, is the legal fiction required by the legal mind to connect the growing conceptions of the authority of the clergy with the earlier days of Christianity.... A legal fiction has generally some historical basis to start from.... The fiction in ecclesiastical government had also its basis of fact. The apostles had founded many of the churches, and their first converts or others suitable had become the first office-bearers. There had been a succession of leaders.... All these successions of office-bearers could be traced back to the foundation of the churches in which they existed, and therefore to the missionaries, whether apostles or apostolic men, who had founded them. This was the historical thread on which, in the end, was strung the gigantic figment called apostolic succession—a strange compound of minimum of fact and maximum of theory.¹⁷

(3) The Multiplication of Orders

The middle of the third century also witnessed the multiplication of orders within the ministry of the Christian Church. Although we find the distinction between those who are to be obeyed and those who are to obey clearly laid down in the Epistles of Paul, we do not find a common term in general use to denote the former class until the third century. In the West the word was "ordo," and in the East "clerus," from which come our terms "orders" and "clergy." "Ordo" was the designation for the municipality in towns or for the committee which presided over a confraternity; and "clerus" denoted rank

¹⁶Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, p. 265.

¹⁷Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries*, pp. 278, 279.

or class. The earliest division of the ministry in the third century was into bishops, presbyters and deacons; but bishops and presbyters were sometimes said to form the special "ordo ecclesiasticus." The earliest addition to those three orders was the reader, and there followed soon the sub-deacon. Then were added such persons as exorcists, acolyths, singers, door-keepers, and even grave-diggers; and to such the name "minor order" was given. All were included within the clergy, all received a proportionate share of the revenues of the congregational funds.

The presence of bishops, presbyters and deacons needs no explanation. Readers were needed at first to assist illiterate bishops or pastors; their retention and the insertion of exorcists have been plausibly accounted for by the idea that they represented the absorption of the old prophetic ministry. But in instituting the other "minor orders" the Christian Church evidently copied the pagan temple usages where persons who performed corresponding services were included among the temple ministry and had due share of the temple revenues.

V

THE FORMATION OF THE CLERGY INTO A SEPARATE CLASS IN THE THIRD AND FOURTH CENTURIES

It seems reasonable to conclude with Hatch that during the first two Christian centuries the Church officers were not regarded as possessing other powers than those which naturally attached to presidents and leaders of a community.¹⁸ However, beginning in the third century and reaching its consummation after the recognition of Christianity by the State in the fourth century, we note the officers of the Church gradually being formed into a class standing apart from the mass of the Christian community, invested with attributes of special sanctity, and living, or supposed to live, by a higher rule of life than that of those to whom they ministered.

There were several factors which contributed to the making of the clergy a sep-

arate class and especially after the recognition of Christianity by the State. In the first place, the State conceded to the officers of the Christian Churches those immunities which were enjoyed by the heathen priesthood and by some of the liberal professions. The officers of the Churches thereafter became exempt from holding office as municipal magistrates or senators, from acting as trustees, or from serving in the army. In the second place, the State granted to the officers of the Christian Churches an exemption from the ordinary jurisdiction of the civil courts.

The joint effect of these exemptions from public burdens, and from the ordinary courts, was the creation of a class distinction from the rest of the community. Thus, the clergy came to have a distinct civil status. Moreover, the State allowed the Churches to hold property. The enthusiasm, or the policy, of Constantine went considerably beyond this. He ordered that not only the clergy but also the widows and orphans who were on the Church-roll should receive fixed annual allowances; he endowed some Churches with fixed revenues; in some cases he gave to Churches the rich revenues or the splendid buildings of heathen temples. Consequently, the clergy became not only independent, but in some cases wealthy.

Hatch makes this statement:

The effect of the recognition of Christianity by the State was thus not only to create a class civilly distinct from the rest of the community, but also to give that class social independence. In other words, the Christian clergy, in addition to their original prestige as office-bearers, had the privileges of a favoured class, and the power of a moneyed class.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

So grew and developed the Christian ministry during the early centuries.

A significant conclusion deduced from the development of the Christian ministry in the early centuries is contained in these words of Lindsay:

There is and must be a valid ministry of some sort in the churches which are branches of this

¹⁸Hatch, Edwin, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, p. 118.

¹⁹Hatch, Edwin, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches*, p. 151.

one Visible Catholic Church of Christ; but I do not think that the fact that the Church possesses an authority which is a direct gift from God necessarily means that the authority must exist in a class or cast of superior office-bearers endowed with a grace and therefore with a power "specific, exclusive and efficient," and that it cannot be delegated to the ministry by the Christian people. I do not see why the thought that the authority comes from "above," a dog-

matic truth, need in any way interfere with the conception that all official ecclesiastical power is representative and delegated to the officials by the membership and that it has its divine source in the presence of Christ promised and bestowed upon His people and diffused through the membership of the Churches.²⁰

²⁰Lindsay, T. M., *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Churches*, p. ix (Preface).