

TAKING THE LID OFF THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY

The frozen potential is beginning to thaw; the lid is being lifted from the mas-power of the Clergy, the restrictions are there if only we can release them. Such is the conviction that is being borne in upon us by the movement, for instance, for Christian leadership. At the moment there are but stirrings beneath the surface. On top there is a hard crust of traditional attitudes towards the ministry, which is inhibiting any general release of spiritual power.

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MINISTRY

by

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The effectiveness of the Church's ministry is prejudiced by false distinctions, between professional and amateur, clerical and lay, male and female

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Our concern should not be with repairing the cracks, but with taking the lid off altogether, releasing the potential that is at present stopped up or, rather, to change the atmosphere, allowing expansion and development to organs of ministry within the body which are atrophied or paralysed.

The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to some of the barriers, some of the lines or partitions, which at the moment restrict a free flow of ministry within the body as a whole.

(i.) There is first, the professional line, which reserves the ordained ministry, with few exceptions, to those who derive their living from it. This is a line which has not existed in the early centuries of the Church, in so far as most if not all its members were also engaged in secular occupations. The financial ability of the Church to free its leadership for full time personal work represented an obvious gain. The restriction of the priesthood, and in due course the diaconate, also, to those extracted from the world's life introduced a line which pastorally, spiritually and economically is proving increasingly unsatisfactory. The line has always been tenuous in the educational world and to a limited extent in the agricultural. And within recent years a number of holes have been made in it, as bishops have ordained the occasional man to work on the factory floor or laid hands on a doctor or librarian or bank-clerk. But these are all very such exceptions to the rule - representing the admission of the ordinary labourer into a class of professionals. What needs to be faced is the desirability of the line itself.

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The frozen potential is beginning to thaw; the lid is being lifted from the man-power of the Church; the resources are there if only we can release them. Such is the conviction that is being borne in upon us by the movement, for instance, for Christian Stewardship. At the moment these are but stirrings beneath the surface. On top there is a hard crust of traditional attitudes towards the ministry, which is inhibiting any general release of spiritual power. There are indeed cracks on the surface, and the danger is that we shall see what is happening simply as a disintegration of our existing structure, and view any new forms of ministry merely as stop-gaps, something with which to plug holes, in the way that supply teachers are called when the regular school staff is strained to breaking point. If that is our attitude to the present crisis, then we shall deserve to reap no spiritual benefit from it. Experiments will rightly be regarded as expedients to which we are being driven by the exigencies of money or manpower.

But such a reading of the situation would, I believe, be both disastrous and unjust. I am persuaded that the stirrings we feel are not the twitchings of a dying ministry. Our concern should not be with repairing the cracks, but with taking the lid off altogether, releasing the potential that is at present stopped up; or, rather, to change the metaphor, allowing expansion and development to organs of ministry within the Body which are atrophied or embryonic.

Bishop Emrich of Michigan has already made a powerful plea along these lines in his exhilarating contribution to "Part-time Priest?" The purpose of this essay is to draw attention to some of the barriers, some of the lines of partition, which at the moment restrict a free flow of ministry within the Body as a whole.

(1.) There is first, the professional line, which reserves the ordained ministry, with few exceptions, to those who derive their living from it. This is a line which was non-existent in the early centuries of the Church, in so far as most if not all its ministers were also engaged in secular occupations. The financial ability of the Church to free its leadership for full time pastoral work represented an obvious gain. The restriction of the priesthood, and in due course the diaconate, also, to those extracted from the world's life introduced a line which pastorally, evangelistically and economically is proving increasingly unsatisfactory. The line has always been crossed in the educational world and to a limited extent in the agricultural. And within recent years a number of holes have been made in it, as bishops have ordained the occasional man to work on the factory floor or laid hands on a doctor or librarian or bank-clerk. But these are all very much exceptions to the rule - representing the admission of the odd amateur into a team of professionals. What needs to be faced is the desirability of the line itself.

Should the priesthood necessarily or normally be a profession? There will indeed always be the need for every proper safeguard (exercised not so much by legal definition as by co-ordinated episcopal discretion) to ensure that it is not combined with sec--

ular status or employment that destroys a man's spiritual efficacy. But, with this proviso, the professional line should surely be allowed to wither away till it becomes as incidental to a man's ministry as it already is in the academic world. I myself have moved in and out of situations in the course of my ministry in which I have been employed by the Church and by a secular body. I cannot say that it has made any fundamental difference to my priesthood. The ministry, like any team, can function, and I would say function better, without the line between amateurs and professionals.

If we are to take its abolition seriously, we must do two things. First, we must abandon our inherited and ingrained assumption of what the Bishop of Michigan calls the 'one type soldier' army. On this assumption the full time parish priest is the only type of man-power we are really interested in and all other ministries will be regarded as supplementary, if not as supernumerary. And we shall not have shed this assumption till it is regarded as perfectly natural that a parish staff should consist not only of whole time clergy but of (perhaps considerably more) priests and laymen working during the day at various levels of the community's life.

Secondly, we must devise methods of training which do not presuppose abstraction from the world either before or after ordination. Such courses have the advantage of being serviceable for those who wish to be ordained to a full time ministry but who cannot in the meantime abandon their family responsibilities to take up residence in a theological college for two or three years. I need not go into the details of what such a training course might look like, as a specimen is now available in the Southwark Ordination Training Scheme. At the moment this is very much of a pilot venture. As other dioceses make similar experiments, and as the traditional pattern of theological college training is modified at other points (as it certainly will be), the line between a professional and non-professional ministry is likely to become blurred.

(2). Related to the professional line, though distinct from it, is the clergy line. This is a line drawn not within the ranks of the clergy but between the clergy and the laity. The two lines are related in that they became established at much the same time and through much the same causes. But the clergy line is even less essential and indigenious to the life of the Church than that between a paid and an unpaid ministry.

To clarify the discussion it is necessary to draw a distinction. There is on the one hand the difference between the various offices and administrations with the Church - between bishops, priests, deacons, readers, catechists, etc., etc. There are diversities of order and ministry, and any living Church will mark them and recognize them as richly as the Holy Spirit requires. Our modern Church order is in fact impoverished compared with that of the primitive or even the medieval Church, and nothing that I go on to say about erasing lines should be taken to imply that I wish to see this diversity further reduced. Quite the opposite.

But somewhere within this diversity there occur another division, that between 'clergy' and laity'. Where the line comes is somewhat arbitrary. In the Church of Rome, if I understand it aright, men in all seven orders are regarded as clergy. In the

Church of England the line between clergy and laity is drawn below the diaconate, although in function deacons and lay-readers are far closer than deacons and priests. Moreover, deaconesses, though recognized as ordained, belong not to the house of clergy but to the house of laity. (This is solemnly said to be 'without prejudice to their ordained status'!)

The point I wish to make is not that this line is somewhat arbitrary, but that it is a fundamentally different kind of line from that, say, between the presbyterate and the diaconate. The difference between a priest and a deacon is drawn by the Church itself and belongs to its own economy. The distinction between clergy and laity is neither fundamental nor native to the life of the Church. As Dr. F.R. Barry says in "Asking the Right Questions", 'In the Bible, the Cleros means the Laos -- the Lord's portion, that is, the people of God. (The cleroi of the elders in I Peter 5 : 3 are the people committed to their charge - not the status to indicate how the distinction with which we are familiar is an importation from secular usage: "The division of the congregation into clergy and laity and the common mode of making the difference apparent in daily ecclesiastical life were both borrowed from the usage of the civil society around them. The laity were called plebs and the clergy the ordo - the names applied to the commons and the Senate of the Italian and provincial towns'. But more important than the nomenclature is the fact that this division was entrenched by the establishment of the Church under Constantine. In the words this time of Basil Minchin's refreshing study, "Every Man in his Ministry," It transferred to the Christian clergy the rights which had previously been enjoyed by the heathen priesthood. The Christian clergy could now claim benefit of clergy by which they were placed outside the jurisdiction of the secular courts. Clergy were relieved of the public duties of town government and the magistracy, which, apart from being a tie upon time, were also a considerable financial strain upon those elected to these offices .... From the Church's point of view the effect of these privileges was to create a clerical class distinct from the rest of the community.

Its effect was also to make it necessary to define carefully who was and was not included in these benefits, and so to write the distinction between clergy and laity into the heart of the Church's own constitution, '" Duo sunt genera Christianorum," writes Gratian in the twelfth century: there are two kinds of Christians and bad Christians but priests on the one hand and "laymen" on the other'.

The Reformation, as we are now realizing, left the Church, both Catholic and Protestant, deeply clericalist. Dr. E.L. Mascall has spoken of the 'clericalism of the Word which is every bit as radical (and, we might add, as unprimitive) as any clericalism of the sacraments had ever been in Catholicism' and Dr. Barry in quoting him adds, 'Still today the English protestant layman or nominal C. of E. man keeps one foot on the Latin side of the Reformation watershed ..... For all his denunciation of "priestcraft" he remains an inveterate sacerdotalist.

Religion, he thinks, is the business of the parson.'

I would put the question in all seriousness whether, with the final disintegration of medieval Christendom, the distinction between the various orders of the Body, should have any further validity. The issue is raised very forcibly by the ordination of men in secular employment. Should those enjoy the benefit of clergy or what is left of it (for instance, the exemption from conscription and jury service) and should they endure the disabilities of clergy (most importantly the exclusion from the House of Commons)? My own answer would be that they should be classed as priests (if that is the order which they are ordained with the councils and convocations of the Church, but that the distinction between clergy and laity should be legally abolished. I am not thereby urging disestablishment but simply the end of privileges and anomalies which in any case have constantly been attenuated in the course of our history.

The effects of the clergy line are not only legal; nor are they confined to the priesthood. Indeed, I believe it is this line more than anything else which stultifies the diaconate and inhibits the whole ministry of the laity.

As long as we have a clergy line and the diaconate remains above it, I doubt if we shall make anything of deacons. They will continue to be embryonic priests because, as every other denomination has found, there is no real room within the ministry of the Word and Sacraments for more than two orders. (In the Church of Rome the functions of the diaconate are even more residual than in the Church of England and in the Protestant Churches deacons are normally not clergy.) Creating 'permanent' deacons of the kind we have now is unlikely to satisfy either the needs of the Church or the vocation of the individual. For what the situation requires is priests - or, if not, then a lay reader can already do all that is necessary.

The only way of rescuing the diaconate from being a mere probationary office for the priesthood is to require for it quite different qualifications from those which we rightly demand of the ministry of the Word. We may well have something to learn from the Baptist and Congregationalist Churches here, and perhaps, more from the Church of Scotland, though I suspect we should be wise not to import their term 'elder' and the confusion which has accompanied it. For an elder is by derivation the same as a priest. We should be much more scriptural if, with the Episcopal Church of Scotland, and the Church of South India, we were to speak of bishops, presbyters and deacons. For the hierous, priest, is never used of a special order of ministry in the New Testament. There is a special order of presbyters, in which a man is incorporated by ordination; but a Christian is made a priest not at ordination but at baptism.

Let us not, by the word 'elder' confuse presbyters and deacons, just because both are working in the world. Let us indeed have 'working presbyters' to share and pioneer much of the pastoral and evangelistic work in house churches and extra-parochial groups which the single-handed incumbent cannot hope to tackle. But

let us also have a genuine ministry of deacons. Besides having restored to them their proper, and considerable, part in the Liturgy, they could take responsibility for much of the parish administration and for that whole area of ministry, both spiritual and material, which is immediately thrown into relief when a church embarks on a Stewardship Campaign. The diaconate would also seem the appropriate order for the growing number of churchmen involved in diocesan administration (indeed many of the arch-deacon's functions should never have devolved on a priest) and in the 'permanent civil service' of Church House and the Church Commissioners. Such men would not be 'clergy'; nor would they have to go through C.A.C.T.M. and a theological college: but, like the Scottish eldership, the diaconate would be a life-order and they would have to be carefully chosen and appropriately trained.

I believe paradoxically that we shall begin to reinstate the diaconate as we strip it of its 'dog-collar' status. I shall doubtless be accused thereby of destroy that sacred cow of the Anglican Church 'the threefold ministry.' I would reply that it is destroy already. We preserve the threefold ministry by making it genuinely threefold, not by keeping it clerical, retaining it within the club. Nowhere has clericalism eaten more deeply into our judgments than at this point. Let us continue, with the Prayer Book, to 'make' deacons; we may call them 'ordained' if we desire, but once the clergy line is removed the difference between the various ministries becomes a matter as in the New Testament, of appropriate diversity rather than of class distinction.

The abolition or blurring of the clergy line is also of major importance for restoring the ministry of all Christian people. At present the ministry' means the 'clergy' and 'going into the ministry' means being ordained. It should mean being confirmed just as 'going into the Church' should mean being baptized. But in practice the 'ministry' is confined to those above the clergy line. However much the layman is told he is in the ministry of the Church, he does not really believe it. It is necessary to restore to 'every member of the same' his vocation and ministry.' And we shall achieve this not only by making the diaconate a genuine third order; not only by giving proper recognition to charismatic ministries of readers, teachers, healers, etc.; but by convincing the layman that he is not simply what is left when these other ministries have been creamed off, but possessed an irreplaceable ministry in the world which might even be destroyed by ordination. The difference between the man 'in orders' and the layman could be expressed by saying that while the former is authorized to represent the Church to the world, the latter is set to represent the Church in the world. For some the authority conferred by orders will assist their witness, for others it may be a stumbling block to their identification with and acceptance by those among whom they work. But any such distinction is within the ministry, not between 'the ministry' and 'the laity' and it is a difference of degree, not of kind.

(3) Intimately connected with the problem of restoring the priesthood of all believers is the most closely guarded line of all, the sex line. The slightest hing of opening the priesthood to women is calculated to raise the blood pressure more abruptly than any proposals, however radical, in the fields we have so far

discussed. But I believe we must be prepared to look at this line quite dispassionately as it cuts its path through the ministry of the Church.

In the past the issue has tended to be approached from the question: 'Should women be priests?' I suggest that the right place from which to start is rather: 'How is the priesthood of the Church (and indeed the total ministry of the Church) to be given proper expression in a Communion whose statistics show that six out of ten of its confirmed members are women?'

The Church has still hardly begun to face this question. The present state of women's ministry in the Church of England is unbelievably parlous. The number of women preparing for full time parish work scattered through the training houses of the country is pathetic - at one time when the men's theological colleges are so full that one cannot close any of them. The reason is not far to seek. Apart from the pittance we give them they have no security, no prospects and no status - except that of perpetual curates. Moreover, for the educated graduate, of whom the Church, like the nation, will be getting more and more, we have virtually nothing to offer them which can challenge or extend them or give them the responsibility that innumerable secular openings can now provide. Of course, it is of the highest importance that these openings should be entered by Christians and that such work should be seen as an essential part of the Church's mission and ministry. But it is equally important for men; and no one would use this as an argument for not having an ordained or commissioned male ministry.

Let us face the fact that the Church has not yet become the Body in which there is neither male nor female. Indeed the world has here quite outstripped the Church. We are only just reaching the point, and that not without agony, at which in Christ there is neither white nor black. And the comparison is relevant. For most of us would judge that the refusal, say, of the white Southerner to take Communion from the hands of a Negro reflected an attitude which struck at the very heart of the Christian Gospel and indeed made communion in holy things impossible. But is this in any way different from the revulsion of the average Englishman at the very idea of receiving the chalice from a woman? I am not saying it springs from a comparable animosity: in fact it would be just as much resented by most women. But I am saying it is pure prejudice, and one which theologically speaking is as destructive of the character of the Church as class division or colour bar at the Communion Table.

Dr. Barry writes in the book I quoted earlier: 'Even an ordained deaconess is more restricted in the liturgical functions which she may perform than a male lay reader.' By this he means presumably that she cannot administer the chalice. In fact, if I understand it aright, the situation is both worse and perhaps better than he makes it. For in fact any layman can, if necessary administer the chalice - he does not need to be a reader - and indeed I am frequently giving such permissions. It does not belong to the office of a reader and it does not appear on his licence.

It seems indeed absurd that it does not belong to the office of a deaconess, as of a deacon, to 'help the priest in the distribution of the Holy Communion.' (Notice, in passing, that this is how the Prayer Book expresses it: it does not limit it to the chalice.) But just as it does not belong to the office of a reader and yet he, and all male laymen, can be given permission to do so, is there any reason why any woman, deaconess or otherwise, should not be given similar permission?

But this of course is a very minor matter--the sort of question on which the world cannot conceive how the Church can spend so much time. I raise it because I believe it is one where the discrimination against women can be demonstrated to be sheer prejudice. But the real issue is whether here as elsewhere we should not give the fullest possible scope to the manpower of the Church. I think it is time someone in authority had the courage to say that the Church of Sweden has put us on the spot. It is easy to say that the ordination of women there was forced upon the Church by the State. After the history of our own Reformation and the actions of Henry VIII we are hardly in a position to cast that particular stone. But we should also give the Church of Sweden credit for having wrestled with the theological issues far more deeply than we have done. In Sweden the opening to all Christians of the priesthood to which they are baptized was opposed on two grounds--of Scripture and tradition. The opposition was deeply sincere. Nevertheless, the scriptural arguments were frankly fundamentalist--quoting texts as though S. Paul's views on women were the last word. And I believe it will be recognized, as it was eventually recognized by the majority of the Swedish Church, that the appeal to tradition as final in this matter is equally fundamentalist.

I am persuaded that any theological objections to the full ministry of women are at best special pleading. Most recently, for instance, Dr. E. L. Mascall has argued<sup>15</sup> that only a male priest can exercise (sic) the fatherhood of God and represent the (masculine) high priesthood of Christ. But he is apparently perfectly happy to envisage a woman non-conformist minister (or, as he thinks, layman) preaching--and presumably thereby mediating in some way the prophetic office of Christ.<sup>16</sup> The whole argument depends on there being a masculine mystique about the priesthood per se which I find completely unconvincing. There are, of course, a number of non-

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<sup>15</sup> Women and the Priesthood of the Church (Church Literature Association. No date (1960?)). For the other side, see the articles in Theology by Sherwin Bailey and M. E. Thrall, September 1954; by 'Luce Magistra,' July 1960; and M. E. Thrall, The Ordination of Women to the Priesthood (S.C.M. Press, 1958).

<sup>16</sup> He would presumably have no theological objection to women lay-readers. This might indeed be the next step. The lay house of Church Assembly has already voted in favour of it (February 1959), with a surprising welcome from The Church Times (February 6th, 1959).

theological objections, but none of them are decisive. The matter, as I see it, is one of economy, of oikonomia, proper house-keeping within the household of God. Let us look at it dispassionately, and if necessary long--and in the closest conjunction with other Communions. But at least let us not sheer off it in a conspiracy of silence. In any case it is time the Church of England was adult enough to cease regarding the ordination of women as part of the battle of feminism. It is absurd to-day that in order to advocate it one should be forced into the ranks of the suffragettes.

I have concentrated on the main issue, because until this is resolved all lesser ministries for women will be blighted. Naturally, it is necessary to start where we are and begin by abolishing the prejudices and the parsimony which cripple what ministries for women we already possess. But, as in every other form of service, unless the ends are open, the restrictions will be felt all along the road.

I have drawn attention to three lines, the professional line, the clergy line and the sex line, which are inhibiting the full exercise of the ministry of Christ within His Body. There are other lines. There are the denominational lines, which confine the ministerial resources of all our traditions to water-tight compartments. These are, within our own Church, the party lines, which with the aid of patronage trusts virtually reduce parts of it to closed circuits. Again, there is the excessive entrenchment of the parish priest within the perimeter of his own boundaries and the island security of his own freehold. All these lines make for isolationism and therefore for weakness. But I have concentrated on the three I have because they run deeper beneath the surface and are more potent for being so largely unacknowledged.

From Keble Conference on the Ministry, 1960  
Keble College