

The Ministerial Service of Women

THE two archbishops of the Church of England have recently appointed a committee to examine the question of women and holy orders. This is a fresh illustration of a situation which is clearly developing in all churches. In some churches decisions have already been made, so that women are ordained into the ministry; this is the situation in a number of Lutheran and Presbyterian churches, in Congregationalism and among some Methodists.

It cannot be said that Baptists in Britain have yet given very serious consideration to the situation, although it is affecting Baptists as much as other churches. In addition to the general situation, with its common tendencies and pressures, some special elements among Baptists today call for careful thought about the ministerial service of women.

The obvious fact, so often mentioned but so seldom thoughtfully considered, is that a number of Deaconesses are doing the work of ministers. They were not trained as ministers; they are not accorded the status of ministers. But they are in sole pastoral charge of congregations. They preach and teach, baptize and preside at the Lord's Table, visit and counsel, represent the local congregation in its neighbourhood and in its Association. This is not a satisfactory position. Our particular circumstances, as well as our general situation, call us to careful thought on this matter. All this article sets out to do is to suggest some lines of thinking.

We begin where Baptists naturally begin, with the New Testament. Here it must be recognised that we are not to seek in the New Testament a complete system of regulations for the organisation of the church; there is no clear and absolute pattern to which the church in its external life must necessarily conform. What we seek are the basic principles of the Christian faith which we must then try to interpret in the contemporary situation.

This approach helps us to notice some interesting features of the New Testament evidence while it does not bind us to a copying of them. We notice, for example, that although our Lord accepted the service of women, his twelve apostles were men, and it was they whom Jesus commissioned to preach and teach. Again, we notice that in the apostolic church men were the leaders, but women were obviously active in many ways. A number of women are mentioned in Acts, including Priscilla who, with her husband, clearly exercised leadership in the local congregation; and the daughters of Philip who are described as prophetesses and therefore presumably were

vocal. The concluding chapter of Romans has several references to women who have toiled hard in Christian service, and it begins with a commendation of Phoebe "who holds office in the congregation at Cenchrea." In 1 Cor. 11 : 5, Paul speaks hypothetically of a woman praying or prophesying bareheaded, and what he prohibits is not the praying or the prophesying, but the lack of a covering.

All this is simply a reminder of the considerable place which women occupied in the apostolic church. What then are we to say about the Pauline prohibition of women speaking in church? In 1 Cor. 14 : 34, 35, he writes : "Women should not address the meeting," "it is a shocking thing that a woman should address the congregation." In 1 Tim. 2 : 12 this has become a general principle : "I do not permit a woman to be a teacher . . . she should be quiet." These injunctions were written in regard to particular problems in specific churches; they were the necessary and wise answer to those problems. But such injunctions cannot be regarded as principles of abiding validity for the ordering of the church's life; they are rather particular illustrations of the fundamental principle that personal desires and emotions must be subordinate to the edification of the church and the commendation of the gospel to the non-believer. Regarding these phrases, therefore, as necessary injunctions for the church in first century pagan society, and not as basic principles, we still have to ask : does the New Testament offer any basic principle to help us? Two such principles may be mentioned.

1. Since all Christian thought must be determined by God's self revelation in Jesus Christ we begin with the new personal relationships which exist where the lordship of Christ is acknowledged. This is well expressed in Gal. 3 : 28. "There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for you are all one person in Christ Jesus." The context of this passage shows that Paul is thinking of the initial experiences of salvation in faith and baptism. Hence we may say that in regard to salvation, i.e., acceptance by God, and the new life in His Kingdom, distinctions of sex are irrelevant. The considerable place which women occupied in the apostolic church is the beginning of the outworking of this fundamental Christian principle.

2. Those who live in Christ recognise the origin of all life in the creative will of God; this means in regard to our particular subject that the distinction of male and female as a differentiation of nature and function is seen as deriving from the divine creative act. According to this view of life, male and female are complementary to each other, so that both are required for fulness of life.

The biblical position, therefore, appears to be that distinctions of sex are irrelevant in the presence of God, who regards all equally as persons, but in the ordering of human society men and women,

by their differences in nature and function, are complementary to one another so that they are only able to achieve fulness of life together.

Before we apply these principles to our situation as Baptists, we may notice very briefly some illustrations of them in the history of the church.

The Roman church has maintained rigidly a male priesthood; yet women can form religious communities where a woman can become a Mother Superior or a "Rev. Mother," exercising spiritual direction in the lives of others. The existence of such religious communities which include women, side by side with a parish system controlled by a male priesthood, is a way of acknowledging the complementary nature of men and women in the total ministry of the church.

Among a number of European Protestant churches women are used in deaconess orders, working mainly in welfare services, in homes for the elderly and for orphans, or in nursing homes. They are not ministers in a professional sense, but they do hold a recognised and honoured place in the ministry of the whole church; so again the complementary principle is worked out.

In the missionary service of the church women have served in many ways, in nursing, teaching and in women's work in the church. Much of this service could not have been done by men, and again the complementary nature of men and women in the ministry of the church is to be discerned.

We are now able to consider some implications of the position which has been outlined, and the first is that there does not appear to be any valid theological objection to the opening of all offices in the church to suitably gifted members of the church without distinction of sex. In this sense ministers may be men or women.

Then we have to say that both biblical teaching and the practice of the church suggest that the ministry of the church is most comprehensive and effective when men and women are seen as complementary. To assume that all women and all men who are ministers must necessarily fulfil exactly the same functions in the church is to ignore the variety of spiritual gifts as well as the general truth that many women can fulfil certain functions more adequately than men, and many men fulfil others better than women.

Here we should remember that among Baptists the Deaconess Order was founded on this principle. It was not intended that Deaconesses should assume sole pastoral charge of a congregation; on the contrary, Deaconesses were to assist ministers particularly with women's work and in pastoral care. This was a sound expression of the complementary nature of men and women in the work of the ministry, though we may be no longer satisfied with some elements in the position of Deaconesses.

This brings us to some practical considerations. I want to suggest that where this concept of a complementary ministry is accepted three results follow :

1. Men and women should share the same basic theological training for the work of the ministry, and the same opportunities for reading for a University degree.
2. Men and women should be given at least twelve months further training after the basic theological course; this training would offer variety according to the function which the individual would be likely to fulfil in the ministry.
3. Men and women should receive the same ordination, be given the same status and the same stipend.

I should like to think that these three statements will meet with serious attention, and that they might be put into effect in our denominational organisation.

But this will involve us in some changes in our thinking about the ministry, for the argument I am developing rests upon the acceptance of a corporate ministry in place of an individual ministry. I believe that Baptists have placed too strong an emphasis upon two elements in the ministry: there has been too great emphasis upon the office of ministry as confined to the pastorate of a congregation, and upon the ministry as the work of one man in one congregation.

It is generally accepted today that the ministry of the church fundamentally is what the whole church offers in the name of Christ, with each member sharing according to gift and experience. Within such a ministry there must, of course, be leaders, and among the leaders will be "pastors and teachers." This is the concept of a corporate ministry. But the Baptist emphasis upon the independence of each congregation prevents us from accepting this corporate concept, and makes us strive to retain the poorer concept of one man and one congregation.

I believe that we should interpret our emphasis upon the local church in terms of the community of Christians in a given geographical area, even though normally the community might meet in several congregations. In a town where there are now four Baptist churches, each with its own name, its own organisation, its own minister, there could be one Baptist church meeting normally in its four separate buildings as four distinct congregations.

With regard to the ministry, this larger unit could, of course, maintain several ministers, but since they were ministers of one church they could be chosen for the variety of their gifts, age and experience. Then in addition to the duties all would fulfil, such as preaching, each one could specialise in one aspect of the work among the four congregations. Thus one could specialise in youth work, another in pastoral counselling, another in public affairs, etc.

In such a team or fellowship of ministers it would be easy and advantageous for at least one to be a woman. Such a corporate ministry could offer a more comprehensive and effective service to the churches, and in the name of the church. In such a ministerial fellowship each minister, especially an unmarried minister, would find strength and an answer to problems of loneliness or depression.

It cannot be argued that this corporate concept of ministry is foreign to Baptist ways, for in fact it has been practised for a long time in missionary work. The missionaries who live together in a compound constitute a team in which each has a place. The work is allotted so that all can serve according to ability and developing experience. In this corporate manner a ministry is exercised.

If we are bold enough to think along these lines, I believe that our church life would be enriched, and all our ministry be more effective. Within such a ministry I can see an acceptable place for the ministerial service of women; such a place I hope they will be able to occupy.

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BAPTISTS IN LIVERPOOL

(Notes concluded from p. 200)

⁹ See C. H. Firth: *Cromwell's Army* (1902), 65, *Trans. Hist. Soc. of Lancs. and Cheshire*, Vol. 13 (1860-1), 177; Unedited letters of Cromwell, Colonel Jones, Bradshaw and other regicides.

¹⁰ *Clarke Papers*, ed. C. H. Firth (1891-1901), Vol. IV, 154.

¹¹ *Ludlow's Memoirs*, ed. C. H. Firth (1894), i. 513.

¹² J. P. Prendergast: *The Cromwellian Settlement in Ireland* (1870), 344.

¹³ R. Dunlop: *Ireland Under the Commonwealth* (1913), 451, 490, 499.

¹⁴ *Thurloe State Papers* (1742), Vol. VI, 142.

¹⁵ *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland*, 1647-60, 692.

¹⁶ *Ludlow's Memoirs*, ii. 195.

¹⁷ *C.S.P.D.* 1655, 215.

¹⁸ A family pedigree is printed in J. Nichols' *History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester* (1795-1811), Vol. 4, part 2, 767.

¹⁹ Why was Seacombe dismissed from his office and deprived of all his civic privileges? The incident remains a mystery to local historians, but was Seacombe perhaps a Dissenting sympathiser, possibly the gentleman whose daughter appears as a member of the Liverpool Baptist Church in 1730?

²⁰ H. D. Roberts: *Hope Street Church, Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1910), 10-12, presumes quite wrongly that all those presented would be either Papists or Presbyterians.

²¹ Liverpool Town Books, unpublished mss. in Liverpool Record Office, entry under 1685.

²² Lancs. Q. Sess. Indictment Books in Lancs. Record Office.

²³ For the early Quakers in Liverpool, see the article by J. Murphy in *Trans. Hist. Soc. of Lancs. and Cheshire*, Vol. 106 (1954), 79-98.