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A PATTERN FOR MINISTRY?

HOY LEDBETTER

NOTE: Throughout this study the word "minister" and its cognates will be used to refer to numerous functionaries mentioned in the New Testament, including apostles, prophets, evangelists, elders, deacons, and others. "Ministry" will thus indicate any service rendered in the name of Christ, including that of individuals not always thought of as ministers today.

It is generally assumed that congregations require some directing or leading ministry, such as, for example, elders and deacons. One widespread view is that God has bound upon the church in all times and places certain specific forms, that a pattern of ministry was divinely ordained and that the church today must be organized according to that pattern.

An alternative view is that the ministries mentioned in the Bible were—and therefore those existing today *may be*—either expedients taken over from antecedent institutions or new forms initiated because of special needs arising out of the social milieu. The early church thus could have assumed and/or modified forms of leadership which prevailed in Jewish synagogues or Greek guilds, or else it could have taken up entirely new options which proved to be practical means of accomplishing its mission. In any case, these would not be divine requirements but would be expedients which the church was free to

choose for itself. The church in later generations would be at liberty either to adopt the same forms or to choose entirely new ones.

Which of these views is correct? Or in other words, is a specific and essential pattern of ministry set forth in the New Testament, which must be applied to all succeeding generations?

Some Problematical Questions . . .

A "yes" answer to this question will raise a number of other problematical questions. For instance, if (as we assume) some form of ministry is essential to the life of the church, why do we find no attempt in the New Testament to formulate the ministry? That is, why did not somebody who spoke for the Lord say, "Here is the way the church must always be organized"? The absence of such a statement, to say the least, weakens the argument for a pattern of ministry.

Then there is the problem of separating the miraculous from the non-miraculous (at least it is a problem for those among us who do not believe the miraculous ministries exist today). It is generally assumed, for instance, that prophets were inspired but that elders were not. But does prophecy necessarily entail direct inspiration? Or, on the

other hand—especially in view of James' instruction that the elders were to pray over the sick and anoint them with oil—were New Testament elders not inspired?

Another problem is that of distinguishing between temporary and permanent ministers. For example, it is commonly held that apostles were temporary, but that elders were a permanent institution. But in the absence of Biblical establishment of a cut-off point for any ministry, how can we decide which of the numerous ministers in the Bible were temporary? This is a far more challenging undertaking than some of us have thought.

We must also face the difficulty of determining what some functions were at all. What did Paul have in mind in 1 Cor. 12:28 when he referred to "helps" and "administrations"? In our quest for keeping things simple we may identify these with other better known functions, but that is at best an informed guess. A related problem is that of deciding what most of the ministers in the New Testament actually did. Where is the passage which tells us precisely what deacons are for? Why did the early church have "teachers" who were distinguished from other teaching ministers?

Other Problems . . .

Furthermore, there was obviously considerable overlapping of responsibility among ministers. One of our favorite words today is "preacher," but Paul is the only Christian to which the New Testament applies the Greek counterpart (although the verb is used of various other ministers). Peter was an apostle, but he was also an elder. In what respect does Peter the apostle differ from Peter the elder? Also the apostle John calls himself "the elder," although his use of the word may be more one of honor than of

function. But even so, it draws attention to the perplexity we encounter in trying to make words specific which are capable of a wide range of meaning. It is sometimes difficult to decide whether "elder" is used in a technical sense or is just the typical Greek for honorable old age. The same is true of the word *diakonos* (deacon); it is not easy to say whether its use in a given passage is technical or general. Epaphras is called "a faithful minister [literally deacon] of Christ," but what does that mean? Since he was the one from whom the Colossians learned the gospel, it is hard to see how his work at Colossae materially differed from Paul's planting of the church at Corinth.

Then there is the possibility of considerable variation of function within a specific ministry. As an illustration, Paul said, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). It is possible to detect in this verse four kinds of elders: (1) those who do not rule; (2) those who rule but not well; (3) those who rule well but do not preach and teach; and (4) those who both rule well and work hard at preaching and teaching. I recognize that this is probably reading too much from the passage, but it does illustrate our difficulty in determining exactly what the elders did.

And finally we must come to grips with the fact that the Bible enjoins upon ALL members of the church work that is associated with the ministry, including that of elders and deacons. Unfortunately this is a question which I cannot go into now, but any responsible search for a ministerial pattern must consider how wide—or how *narrow*—is the gap between the ministry and the laity and what is the nature of that gap.

But one more question should be asked, and it cannot be taken lightly. If there was an established and inviolate presbyterian form of church government in the first century, how do we account for the easy rise of moniscopacy so soon after the New Testament period? Why did not a battle ensue over what is commonly regarded among us as a notorious departure from the New Testament pattern? As Leon Morris says:

It is probably important that there is no trace of a struggle to get the episcopal system established. Had a divinely ordained Presbyterianism or Congregationalism been overthrown, a bitter struggle would have been inevitable. Most people do not lightly abandon what they have received as a divine gift (*Ministers of God*, p. 98).

Now let's leave the engine and look at the caboose for a moment. It is a common practice in our churches to have, in addition to elders and deacons, a specially selected teacher whom we call a minister or preacher. But where, exactly, does he fit into the New Testament pattern? Is he a prophet, an evangelist, a preacher, a teacher, an elder, or what? I have had a good many discussions with those who sought to employ such a minister, but their interests have inevitably been in more practical matters than following a New Testament pattern of ministry, for the simple fact is, most of us are at a loss when it comes to trying to find the modern preacher in the Bible.

We have also found other forms of ministry to be convenient, such as educational directors, youth ministers, and numerous committee chairmen, but how do we relate these to any New Testament pattern? If we may add functionaries today—as we apparently have—because they are practical aids to the accomplishment of our work, can we not just as legitimately eliminate those ancient forms which do not seem to be relevant to twentieth century culture and needs?

Development of the Ministry . . .

The development of the early Christian ministry is not easy to trace because frequently ministries are mentioned in the New Testament without any indication of their origin. It will be agreed by all that the apostles constituted the original ministry. Not only did they form the nucleus of the early church, but they were the Lord's specially selected spokesmen. Originally there were twelve of them, and the number is not insignificant, since it was Jesus' way of establishing his claim on the twelve tribes of Israel. But the number did not remain at twelve. It is true that one was selected to take the place of Judas, but later on, when James was killed, no successor was chosen for him. But as time passed the number of apostles grew.

James the Lord's brother not only was an apostle, but he was highly distinguished among the apostles in Jerusalem. (Unless we regard him as an apostle, we are confronted with a non-apostle exerting more influence than apostles in the Jerusalem church.) Barnabas is twice called an apostle in Acts 14, and Paul apparently includes Timothy and Silvanus in the apostleship in 1 Thess. 2:6. The same may be said for Apollos, based on 1 Cor. 4:9 and context. The Greek text applies the term to Epaphroditus in Phil. 2:25, as it also does to the brethren who were "messengers [or apostles] of the churches" in 2 Cor. 8:23.

There has been much discussion about Andronicus and Junias in Rom. 16:7. They are said to have been "of note among the apostles." The expression may indicate (and probably does) that they were notable apostles. But there is another interesting aspect of this verse. There is great probability that Junias is a feminine form, and that Junia—a woman—was one of the apostles. This

view has received some venerable support. As C.H. Dodd points out, "Chrysostom, preaching on this passage, saw no difficulty in a woman-apostle; nor need we."

However that may be, one may deduce from these examples that the term "apostle" came to be used somewhat more loosely as the church grew and as qualified coworkers with the original apostles were developed. Thus we see already a certain fluidity in the ministry of the early church.

Apart from the apostles, the earliest indication of a specially selected ministry is that of the seven in Acts 6. They are often regarded as the first deacons since, although they are not called *diakonoi*, the distribution to the widows is a *diakonia*, and their service is *diakonein*. Hence, there is a division of ministry: the seven were chosen to "serve"—*diakonein*—tables, while the twelve were to devote themselves to prayer and the "ministry"—*diakonia*—of the word.

But there are problems in identifying the seven with those later called deacons. For one thing, Philip, one of the seven, is afterward referred to as an evangelist, not a deacon. And another of them, Stephen, was killed because he was such an eloquent spokesman of the Christian message. But more significant is the situation we find a little later at Jerusalem. Acts 11 tells us that Agabus came from Jerusalem to Antioch and prophesied a coming dearth, with the result that "the brethren determined . . . to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul."

This relief is in Greek *diakonia*. And the same Greek word is used in 12:25, where it is noted that Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission (*diakonia*). So this ministry of relief

is a *diakonia* similar to that overseen by the seven in Acts 6. However, on the latter occasion the relief was not administered by the seven or by any other so-called deacons, but by *the elders*. So we are forced to ask: Were these elders the same form of ministry appointed to supervise the distribution to the widows in Acts 6? Perhaps the simplest solution is to see the seven as a special group appointed to a specific job which was eliminated when the situation that required it disappeared. If so, they show that a ministry with stated specific and strict qualifications may be only temporary. However, if we take that line of reasoning, we must deal with the possibility that other functionaries in the New Testament churches, for whom qualifications may also be stated, were also appointed for specific, temporary assignments. Furthermore, if the elders in Acts 11 were overseers of table service—as they apparently were—would those in the time of the Pastoral Epistles have the same responsibility? If so, what did the deacons do?

Possible Synagogal Influence . . .

But where did the elders mentioned in Acts 11 come from? We simply do not know. However, since the institutions of Judaism—and especially the synagogue—were so influential in the early church, we should at least take a brief look at the synagogue. Although the rights of synagogue ownership and administration were vested in the congregation, its affairs were under the direction of a board of elders (usually, but not always, seven in number). We should bear in mind that the governmental significance of such men would be much greater in the Jewish theocracy than that of any corresponding ministers in the church—which was separated from the state. But while civil and adminis-

trative duties in connection with the synagogue fell to the presbyterate, the liturgical affairs were under the ruler of the synagogue. He determined who would pray, who would read and expound scripture, and so forth. Each synagogue had only one such ruler, who was perhaps elected for a term and could be reelected. He had a counterpart in the president of the Greek festal assemblies; and he and his attendant were the real officers of the synagogue.

The church bore a considerable resemblance to the synagogue, and James in fact refers to the Christian assembly as a synagogue. However, we run into a great deal of trouble when we try to identify the ministers of the church with the officers of the synagogue. Although the ruler of the synagogue supervised the building and the conduct of services, he had hardly anything to do with the guidance of the congregation as a fellowship of faith and love. His purview, therefore, was much narrower than that which we ordinarily ascribe to the Christian overseer. Moreover, there is no basis at all for connecting the synagogue attendant with the Christian deacon. In Greek he is *hyperetes*, not *diakonos*.

There is, however, good reason to believe that the Christian elders reflect the Jewish background of the church. Elders were a significant phenomenon in Judaism and had a rich history. Although their scope varied from members of the Sanhedrin to purely local leaders, there is no reason to doubt that the early church simply carried on a tried and true concept of leadership, although they gave it a new orientation—one without the theocratic implications of the Old Testament ministry. Incidentally, the church knows nothing of the priesthood of Judaism, with its implications of authority,

but rather consists of a priesthood of all believers.

As far as the word “bishop” is concerned, we find no clearly defined office with that title in the Old Testament, nor can the Christian bishop have been derived from any known Greek institution.

To sum up, my study has led me to the conclusion that, although there are points of contact with Jewish leaders—and to a lesser extent Greek leaders—the forms of ministry we find in the New Testament could not have been simply assumed from Jewish or Greek culture, for every effort to find their equivalents in the surrounding society breaks down in some essential points. A possible exception is the prophet, who has a forerunner in the Old Testament prophet, and this ministry does not seem to differ significantly from one period to another.

Ministry and the Romans . . .

Now I want to turn to Paul’s three discussions of the body of Christ—in Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12, and Eph. 4—where we find the closest thing in the New Testament to a formulation of the ministry.

In Rom. 12:6-8 we read: “**And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly; if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.**”

Here we have a list of seven functions among the Romans. The first is **prophecy**, which is obviously the work of the prophet. The second is called **service**, but the Greek is *diakonia*, the work of the deacon, although there is no evidence that the term is used in

a technical sense. Then comes **he who teaches**, a generic term which could include practically any ministry of the word. (Note that Paul at this point begins to use substantive participles, instead of abstractions, to designate the functionaries.) Next comes **he who exhorts**, followed by **he who gives**. These are general terms, but it seems there were specially gifted people to carry on such work.

Of particular significance for our discussion is **he who leads**. This term translates the Greek participle *proistamenos*, which in reference to the elders in 1 Tim. 5:17 is translated “who rule.” The range of meaning which the word carries is illustrated by the fact that the RSV renders it in Rom. 12:8 not “he who leads,” but “he who gives aid.” And this rendering seems to be justified by the fact that it comes between two other terms which refer to acts of love (**he who gives** and **he who shows mercy**). Basically the word denotes someone who “stands before,” either to give aid to, or to preside over. Linguistically there could be a reference in this verse to the sort of leadership our interpretations of 1 Tim. 5:17 ascribe to the elders, or it could refer to the kind of presidency characteristic of the chairman of a committee, or it could mean simply one who gives aid to another. There is no warrant for the sort of clear-cut distinction in these meanings suggested by Arndt and Gingrich. Actually the discussions of elders in 1 Tim. 3 and 5 make it clear that they rule in the sense of “caring for” the house of God, not in exercising authority over it.

Meanwhile, back at Rom. 12, we should note, not only what Paul mentions, but also what he does not mention. Although the passage is no attempt to formulate the ministry, we are still surprised that there is

no mention of evangelist, pastor, preacher, elder, or bishop. Moreover, although the terms used imply the presence at Rome of prophets, deacons, teachers, and other leaders, these are referred to by their work rather than by any kind of official names. There is no justification for reading into these expressions any kind of ministerial “office.” There may be various good reasons for this, but one which we cannot afford to dismiss lightly is that Paul, never having been to Rome to visit the church, simply *did not know what the ministers of that community were called*.

Ministry and the Corinthians . . .

Moving on to 1 Cor. 12:28-30, we find Paul saying, “**God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?**”

Without arguing the point, let me state that Paul’s use of the ordinal numerals—**first, second, third**—does not indicate any kind of graded hierarchy. The **apostles, prophets, and teachers** had priority in the church because they were the pioneer ministry and the roots of the church’s development, but that does not mean they constituted a hierarchy. The apostles are first, the prophets second, and the teachers third, not for any arbitrary reason, but because the work of the second just naturally follows the work of the first, as the third does that of the second.

Next in this list are **miracles and gifts of healings**, which call attention to the gift possessed rather than the possessor. **Helps** and **administrations** are of particular interest because this is the only place in the New Testament where they are mentioned. **Helps** is a translation of the Greek *antilempseis* and may mean either “helpers” or “helpful deeds.” Although we may say that “the reference is obviously to the activity of love in the dealings of the community,” we cannot be sure what the precise reference is. Some have argued that this is just another way of referring to the deacons, but it is impossible to convince one who doubts that identification.

Administrations (or “governments” in the KJV) renders the Greek *kuberneseis*, which literally denotes either pilots of ships or the art of steering the ship. Obviously these were people who provided some kind of order and direction for the community, but more than that we cannot say. The plural is used to denote various specific instances of direction, as the plural “helps” denotes various acts of helpfulness. Many expositors have seen these administrations as another name for the eldership, but that is merely a guess, nothing more.

Finally Paul mentions **various kinds of tongues**. Since **administrations** and **tongues** provided the Corinthians with an occasion of indulging in their pet sin of self-assertion, it is probably not without reason that *both of these* appear at the end of the list.

Paul actually gives two listings of ministers in this passage; the second is in his list of rhetorical questions. Frankly, I am not sure what we should make of the fact that when he goes back over the list with his questions, he leaves out **helps** and **administrations** and adds **interpretation of tongues**.

Ministry and the Ephesians . . .

For Paul’s third discussion of the body we move to Eph. 4:11-12: “**He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ.**”

Here we have five different ministries; but since **pastors and teachers** are joined by a common definite article, they should be thought of as one group, although not necessarily identical. Although this list omits several functions which are mentioned in Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12, it adds two which are not included in those chapters: **evangelists** and **pastors**. But it also contributes a great deal more: it provides us with the clearest statement of the purpose of the original ministry to be found in the New Testament. This is brought out best by a quite literal rendering of verse 12, which tells us that the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers were given “for the equipment of the saints, unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ.”

Note the shift in prepositions: “for the equipment of the saints, unto the work of ministry, unto the building up of the body of Christ.” The first preposition “for” (Greek *pros*) denotes the purpose for which the ministers previously mentioned were given. The apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers were given to equip the saints. But the other preposition “unto” (or Greek *eis*) is twice used to denote the reasons why the saints were to be equipped.

They are to do the work of ministry and to build up the body of Christ.

The original ministers were never intended to be exclusive; they were merely pioneers who were to strive toward the goal of turning over their work to the saints whom they were to equip to do it. They formed the nucleus of the church—or in Paul’s words in Eph. 2:20, they were the foundation upon which the rest of the church was built—but they were not intended to wear bars on their shoulders. This concept of the ministry needs to be recovered by the churches today. We will never arrive at full maturity in Christ or attain to “the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God” without it. As long as our ministers claim for themselves rights which other saints do not have, we will choke brotherhood development and fail to arrive at our God-given potential as the body of Christ.

A Summary . . .

As we review these three discussions of the body, we find that only two forms of ministry—the prophets and teachers—are mentioned in all three lists. The apostles are mentioned twice. We might also see two mentions of ministers (or deacons, or servants, depending on how we choose to translate the original), although in one instance the word applies to the saints instead of the pioneer ministers. *But mentioned only once out of three chances are twelve others.* In a couple of cases these may be identified with other functionaries in another list who are given different names, but arguments for such identification are tenuous at best.

If we translate *proistamenos* in Rom. 12 as “he who rules,” we might equate this function with that of “administrations” in 1 Cor. 12 and come up with a possible refer-

ence to the eldership, but that could very well be inflating the evidence. On the other hand, if *proistamenos* in Rom. 12 means “he who gives aid,” there may be an equation with “helps” instead of “administrations” in 1 Cor. 12. The best approach is to abandon attempts at precise definition, and to try to avoid reading into these contexts an understanding of the ministry which we have gathered from other sources.

It seems to me to be significant that the churches at Rome and Corinth apparently did not have ministers which they called elders and deacons. We do know from Acts 20 that there were elders at Ephesus (at least at that time), but that does not mean that the pastors mentioned in Eph. 4 are the same as the elders mentioned in Acts 20. They could be the same, and there is no good reason why they should not be, but there is no conclusive proof that they are. Of course, this is not to say that the work associated with the elders in other places in the New Testament was left undone in the Roman and Corinthian churches.

As far as deacons are concerned, I refer to an important statement in 1 Cor. 16:15-16: “Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors.” The expression “they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints” can quite correctly be translated “they have appointed themselves as deacons (or, if you prefer, ministers) to the saints.” As such self-appointed ministers they were due the same deference as any other ministers; Paul said, “You also be in subjection to such men.” But we should not overlook the fact that they were the firstfruits of Achaia. As

such they would naturally be ministers, since they at one time constituted the nucleus of the church in Achaia. They are therefore a clear case of the apostolic ministry being handed on. The only difference between the nuclear ministry and the corporate ministry—the ministry that includes the whole body of believers—is that of time and maturity.

The Word for Ministry . . .

And the word choice here is worth noting, for if there is any one word in the New Testament to denote the ministry, it is *diakonia*. Although it often refers to table service, it also means much more. It is perfectly adequate to describe the function of the apostle and the evangelist, of whom it is often used in the Bible. And by all means let us not forget that it is this word that Jesus used so emphatically of himself: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve.” And listen to what he says in Matt. 23: “But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth your Father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant.” “Servant” here is *diakonos*. We may translate it deacon, minister or servant, but it represents the highest any Christian can go.

Unfortunately I cannot here survey the extensive use of this word in the New Testament, but such a survey would reveal that the ministry of the church is intended to carry on the work of service which Christ began, with no question of rank but with a determination to serve as brothers under the one Teacher. He himself is the foundation, but his apostles and prophets are also the

foundation, since they carry on his work in the world. So we have a development: Christ the firstfruits, then the pioneer ministry, and then the corporate ministry which includes all the saints.

Now it is my conviction that the form which this ministry takes is not important. We read in Acts 15 of the close association of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (although the chapter clearly indicates that they did not act in important matters without the advice and consent of all the brethren). But, on the other hand, we find at Antioch no elders, but prophets and teachers. And they were the ones who sent Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Again, at Thessalonica we find the ministry referred to in very general terms, with no reference to office, to wit: “We urge you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction” (1 Thess. 5:12). If such passages were intended to provide us with a pattern for the ministry, it is very hard to determine exactly what it is.

In Heb. 13:7, 17, 24 we read of leaders, whom the Hebrews were to obey, and who had spoken the word of God to them. They are not precisely defined, but they must have included those who first preached the gospel to them. Therefore, if they were elders, they were different from the kind we have today. But here again the ministry is referred to in a general way.

By the time we get to the Pastoral Epistles, we find lists of qualifications for elders/bishops, which are reminiscent of the appointment of the seven in Acts 6. We also find in 1 Tim. stated qualifications for deacons and deaconesses. Titus was directed to appoint elders in every city. But nothing is said about Titus appointing deacons and

deaconesses. Moreover, in neither of these epistles is there any statement to the effect that the standard procedure for all times and places was being instituted.

Conclusions . . .

Leon Morris, in his book *Ministers of God*, discusses the pattern of the ministry and says:

There are so many gaps in our knowledge of what went on in New Testament times that we cannot be quite sure what constituted that pattern. Even those groups of Christians who claim to model their polity exactly on the New Testament cannot be certain that they have succeeded. The New Testament tells us a good deal about the ministry . . . but it never gives us a complete list of the ministers in the early Church nor does it tell us precisely what their functions were. No attempt seems to have been made to fasten any pattern on succeeding generations, for no authoritative directions were given as to the mode or perpetuation of the ministry. Ministerial forms have evolved accordingly in a variety of ways. Separated as we are from the New Testament by a gap of some two thousand years, we must expect to find variations in our churches from the wide variety of ministers we have noted in the New Testament (p. 91).

I agree. In fact, Morris has so well stated my own views on this aspect of the ministry that I cannot resist quoting another of his statements:

It appears that none of the modern systems of church government can claim to have sole justification. . . . Some feel this to be a great loss.

They think that in the matter of the ministry we ought to have full scriptural justification for our whole system. Nothing ought to be enjoined but that which can be proved from the New Testament. Unfortunately for this position, the New Testament evidence . . . is not full enough for us to know exactly the position of the early Church. It is full enough for us to say that there were certain officers, such as presbyter-bishops and deacons. But it does not enable us to define their status with precision, nor to understand their relation to other figures in the early Church. The New Testament simply does not give us the answers to all our questions.

And, what is more important, it gives us no hint that the system then in vogue, whatever it was, was meant to be the permanent system for the Church of Jesus Christ as a whole. The one essential ministry is that of Christ Himself. He continues to do His work, though He does it now through men. For this reason the really important thing is the call and equipment of Christ. Lacking this no man can be said to be a true minister. Possessing it he has what matters (p. 111).

To that I can only add my Amen and one final note. I feel it is very important for our interpretation of the New Testament to be in precise harmony with our practices. Since our churches generally have been unable to establish from the Bible a pattern of ministry with which they can live, it seems to me that we should adopt the flexibility in this respect which characterized the early church. It is my hope that this study, which certainly has not been able to deal with all the questions that may be asked, will at least lead us a few steps in that direction. □

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

In addition to the usual reference works which mature students will use, including Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, I heartily recommend for further reading on this subject the following: Leon Morris, *Ministers of God* (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1964); A.T. Hanson, *The Pioneer Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 1961); and Michael Green, *Called to Serve: Ministry and Ministers in the Church* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964).

FELLOWSHIP IN THE CHURCH

RICK DEIGHTON

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Total agreement in understanding is an impossible basis for Christian fellowship. There will always be in the church spiritual babes, young men, and fathers. The younger will not always agree with the teaching (doctrine) of the older because of the varying degrees of maturity. But the fact that there is disagreement does not necessarily mean that those on one side or the other of an issue are outside the pale of God's grace. A clear realization of this could have saved many churches from splitting.

Perfect agreement in doctrine would require perfect knowledge in the scriptures—something which none of us has.

If fellowship were only possible on the basis of agreement in doctrine, God could have no fellowship with any of us. He could find fault with every one of us in our concepts about certain doctrines.

If fellowship were based upon agreement, we would be saved on the basis of knowledge instead of faith. There would be no hope for us ignorant folks who still misunderstand some truths in the Word of God. The Jews were proud of their superior knowledge, but Jesus told them they had missed the point: they thought eternal life was in the scriptures, and they would not come to Christ that they might have life (Jn. 5:39-40). Yes, it is possible to have a head full of Bible and a heart full of sin, but it is not possible to have a heart full of Jesus and a heart full of sin.

Converts in apostolic times were not asked to subscribe to a body of Christian doctrine, but to confess their faith in a Person. Fellowship depends upon a life union relationship with Jesus Christ. Agreement in doctrine does not produce life; but a wholehearted commitment to Christ does! As long as we continue to follow Jesus, He will lead us into depths of scriptural truth that no humanly compiled body of doctrine can tap.

The Bible urges us to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. As long as we continue to study and grow, our concepts of doctrine will be changing. Those who have believed exactly the same things in exactly the same way for 50 years are apt to be so stagnant you can smell them coming. They haven't been doing much refreshing research in the Word, that's for sure! (Note Heb. 5:11-6:3).

As we grow in knowledge, we must keep pace in our growth in grace. A faster growth in knowledge than in grace produces spiritual arrogance. We must have the same grace toward others' concepts that we want them to have toward ours.

If fellowship is based upon agreement in doctrine, we will continually be studying our way out of fellowship with our brethren.

My own concepts of several doctrines have changed considerably in the past few years, but my fellowship with God has only grown richer, fuller, and deeper. However, I

know I had sweet fellowship with Christ even when I was in error doctrinally on those points as I now understand them.

Scriptures have been twisted by well-meaning, but deceived, brethren to try to prove that a lock-step uniformity in doctrine is essential to fellowship.

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Cor. 1:10). What are we to speak the same thing about—

PRAYER FOR A PRISONER

Lord—

Give him integrity in a place
Where men are animals.

Give him a feeling of worth
As No. 28140-117.

Let him know kindness
Where sadism is acceptable,
And being hard is to survive.

Teach him to survive—
And to remain human too.

Let him know love—
Where love is unheard of—
And give love

In a place where love
Is considered perversion.

Give him Your Presence—
Overwhelmingly
In a place where Your Name
Is just another
Vulgarity.

—Terry Osmon

everything? Romans 14 makes this idea obviously false. The context of the passage in question gives the answer. Some men were saying they were of Paul, others of Apollos, some of Cephas, and some of Christ. They were to be of the same mind, the same judgment, and all speak the same thing *about whom they belonged to* that there be no division among them.

"See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern showed to thee in the mount" (Heb. 8:5). I am convinced that this passage has been stretched far beyond its original intent, for where there is no clear statement in the Word of God about this or that issue, some brethren have busied themselves with human deductions to make one up. Then they have turned the sword of their own spirit upon all brethren who did not agree, to try to cut them down to size and fit them into their concocted "pattern." My faith does not rest in my brother's power of mental gymnastics, but in the power of my Mighty God.

The Demands of Love . . .

Christian love compels us to manifest the proper attitudes toward those who disagree with us in doctrine. If a man is a penitent, immersed believer in Jesus Christ, we should regard him as a brother (Acts 2:37-47). To love a man as a brother in Christ, we don't have to love all of his ideas. Some of his ideas may be as hairbrained as some of our own.

If a man is a penitent, *unimmersed* believer in Christ, we should regard him as an unborn child of God. Our part is to patiently and tenderly attempt to bring him to the point of birth, for it is obvious that he has already been begotten anew by the Holy Spirit. (See 1 Jn. 5:1, ASV). A doctor does

not bring a child to birth by stomping on his mother's abdomen; neither should we attempt to bring an unborn spiritual child to birth by stomping on his denomination. That method kills more than it converts. We should major in edification and expose falsehood gradually with both Christians and non-Christians.

If a man is totally outside of Christ, we should love him anyway, and teach him the beauty of Jesus in such an earnest, compassionate manner that it would take the heart of a Pharaoh to resist.

Those who prove themselves to be willfully disobedient or willfully teaching falsehoods are to be disfellowshipped and avoided, unless they repent (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Jn. 7-10).

As a child of the living God, a Christian should display the following qualities when discussing the scriptures with anyone:

1. Genuine love no matter how different the other person's views are.
2. Respect for the other person.
3. A willingness to listen to all that a man has to say about a subject before forming a judgment about its value.
4. A desire to help.
5. A willingness to be helped.
6. A humble spirit rather than a know-it-all attitude.
7. A willingness to understand rather than a suspicious, critical attitude.
8. A basic trust that the other person is honest. If it becomes obvious that he is not sincere, a Christian should not waste valuable time talking to him.
9. A willingness to admit "I don't know" and a desire to find out.
10. A willingness to confess "I was wrong" and change accordingly when necessary.
11. A desire to communicate rather than debate. Debate (or strife) is one of the

works of the flesh condemned by God's Word (Rom. 1:29; 2 Cor. 12:20).

Conclusion . . .

Christian fellowship is in Christ; it is only possible among those who have truly been converted and are walking with Jesus (see 1 Jn. 1:6-7). If a man is in Christ, he is my brother no matter how much we disagree; if a man is not in Christ, he is not my brother no matter how much we may agree in doctrine. I believe this is why Paul reminded the strife-torn Corinthian church of his actions among them. "For I determined not to know anything among you, save *Jesus Christ and him crucified*" (1 Cor. 2:2). □

TO MY BELOVED BROTHER

It's lonesome now.
I've been close to a friend
And we've tamed each other
Only to part.
But there is Jesus to fill
That empty place in my heart.
And so I rejoice
Because He died!
Because He rose!
Because He lives!
And because He loves!
So now I love and am filled
With all His love to give
To all who desire to love
And to all who desire to live.
Praise the Lord! So be it.

—Richard Thornton

REVIEWS

A CHALLENGING UNDERTAKING

Obscenity, Pornography, & Censorship
by Perry C. Cotham. Grand Rapids:
Baker Book House, 1973. 206 pp.
\$2.95 paperback.

Taking on subject matter such as pornography is in most anyone's estimation no easy task. This is especially true when the difficulty is compounded by the fact that the person assuming this task espouses conservative Christianity. It may be too much to ask of such an author that he handle this subject matter in a completely objective manner.

The challenge that may have been greater than first imagined is that of combining in one book an examination of the hazards of strict censorship and an attempt to put the distribution of pornography in the perspective of being a major concern and problem. The first half of Perry Cotham's latest book, *Obscenity, Pornography, & Censorship*, attempts to come to grips with this seeming paradox. Cotham reaches for a solution through asking the censors to "qualify the censorship ban." He sees censorship as a tool to protect the individual against himself. On the other hand, he would ask the censor not to pull the noose too tight. Cotham evidently found this perplexing paradox too hard to handle. He was not able to convince this reviewer that you can get rid of pornography and not have some form of "qualified" censorship at the same time.

Although that task was perhaps a little too hard to handle, Cotham does an excellent job in examining obscenity in its various forms. Obscenity may be many things to many people; however, Cotham points out very well that some segments of society have their views of this matter confused when they criticize sexual-type obscenity and at the same time espouse obscenity in other forms, such as in their language and thoughts as they relate to race, war, poverty and welfare, and politics.

Cotham's final chapter, "The Church's Task," brings the real task home in a powerful manner. The major objective, as he views it, is to alert the individual to his own decision-making ability in order that he may develop his own value system. He argues, however, that this value system must have a base in Christian principles.

One may question the value of having "Questions for Discussion" at the end of each chapter. To this reviewer that only means one thing: that the author wanted to take advantage of the market for Bible school materials. Cotham's scholarly approach (for example, footnotes showing a great deal of research) seems paradoxical in light of the aforementioned criticism.

A reader—depending on his viewpoint—may have a hard time wading through the discussion of pornography and censorship. But once he has done so, he will find much to interest and challenge his thinking processes.

—Robert Cross