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The Sermons of John Wesley - Sermon 115

The Ministerial Office

"No man taketh this honour unto himself but he that is called of God, as was Aaron." Hebrews 5:4.

[Respecting this Sermon the following information is given by Mr. Moore, in his "Life of Mr. Wesley," vol. ii., p. 339: -- "I was with Mr. Wesley in London when he published that Sermon. He had encouraged me to be a man of one book; and he had repeatedly invited me to speak fully whatever objection I had to any thing which he published. I thought that some things in that discourse were not to be found in THE BOOK; and I resolved to tell him so the first opportunity. It soon occurred. I respectfully observed that I agreed with him, that the Lord had always sent by whom He would send, instruction, reproof, and correction in righteousness, to mankind; and that there was a real distinction between the prophetic and priestly office in the Old Testament, and the prophetic and pastoral office in the New; (where no priesthood is mentioned but that of our Lord;) but I could not think that what he had said concerning the Evangelists and the Pastors, or Bishops, was agreeable to what we read there; viz., that the latter had a right to administer the sacraments, which the former did not possess. I observed, 'Sir, you know that the Evangelists Timothy and Titus were ordered by the Apostle to ordain Bishops in every place; and surely they could not impart to them an authority which they did not themselves possess.' He looked earnestly at me for some time, but not with displeasure. He made no reply, and soon introduced another subject. I said no more. The man of one book would not dispute against it. I believe, he saw, his love to the Church, from which he never deviated unnecessarily, had, in this instance, led him a little too far." -- EDIT.]

1. There are exceeding few texts of Holy Scripture which have been more frequently urged than this against laymen, that are neither Priests nor Deacons, and yet take upon them to preach. Many have asked, "How dare any `take this honour to himself, unless he be called of God, as was Aaron'" And a pious and sensible clergyman some years ago published a sermon on these words, wherein he endeavours to show that it is not enough to be inwardly called of God to preach, as many imagine themselves to be, unless they are outwardly called by men sent of God for that purpose, as Aaron was called of God by Moses.

2. But there is one grievous flaw in this argument, as often as it has been urged. "Called of God, as was Aaron!" But Aaron did not preach at all: He was not called to it either by God or man. Aaron was called to minister in holy things; -- to offer up prayers and sacrifices; to execute the office of a Priest. But he was never called to be a Preacher.

3. In ancient times the office of a Priest and that of a Preacher were known to be entirely distinct. And so everyone will be convinced that impartially traces the matter from the beginning. From Adam to Noah it is allowed by all that the first-born in every family was of course the priest in that family, by virtue of his primogeniture. But this gave him no right to be a Preacher, or (in the scriptural language) a Prophet. This office not unfrequently belonged to the youngest branch of the family. For in this respect God always asserted his right to send by whom he would send.

4. From the time of Noah to that of Moses the same observation may be made. The eldest of the family was the Priest, but any other might be the Prophet. This, the office of Priest, we find Esau inherited by virtue of his birth-right, till he profanely sold it to Jacob for a mess of pottage. And this it was which he could never recover, "though he sought it carefully with tears."

5. Indeed in the time of Moses a very considerable change was made with regard to the priesthood. God then appointed that instead of the first-born in every house a whole tribe should be dedicated to him; and that all that afterwards ministered unto him as priests should be of that tribe. Thus Aaron was of the tribe of Levi. And so likewise was Moses. But he was not a Priest, though he was the greatest Prophet that ever lived before God brought his First-begotten into the world. Meantime, not many of the Levites were Prophets. And if any were, it was a mere accidental thing. They were not such as being of that tribe. Many, if not most of the Prophets (as we are informed by the ancient Jewish writers), were of the tribe of Simeon. And some were of the tribe of Benjamin or Judah, and probably of other tribes also.

6. But we have reason to believe there were, in every age, two sorts of Prophets. The extraordinary, such as Nathan, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many others, on whom the Holy Ghost came in an extraordinary manner. Such was Amos in particular, who saith of himself: "I was no Prophet, neither a Prophet's son; but I was an herdman: And the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." The ordinary were those who were educated in "the schools of the Prophets," one of which was at Ramah, over which Samuel presided. (1 Sam. 19:18.) These were trained up to instruct the people, and were the ordinary preachers in their synagogues. In the New Testament they are usually termed scribes, or nomikoi, "expounders of the law." But few, if any of them, were Priests. These were all along a different order.

7. Many learned men have shown at large that our Lord himself, and all his Apostles, built the Christian Church as nearly as possible on the plan of the Jewish. So, the great High-Priest of our profession sent apostles and evangelists to proclaim glad tidings to all the world; and then Pastors, Preachers, and Teachers, to build up in the faith the congregations that should be found. But I do not find that ever the office of an Evangelist was the same with that of a Pastor, frequently called a Bishop. He presided over the flock, and administered the sacraments: The former assisted him, and preached the Word, either in one or more congregations. I cannot prove from any part of the New Testament, or from any author of the three first centuries, that the office of an evangelist gave any man a right to act as a Pastor or Bishop. I believe these offices were considered as quite distinct from each other till the time of Constantine.

8. Indeed in that evil hour when Constantine the Great called himself a Christian, and poured in honour and wealth upon the Christians, the case was widely altered. It soon grew common for one man to take the whole charge of a congregation, in order to engross the whole pay. Hence the same person acted as Priest and Prophet, as Pastor and Evangelist. And this gradually spread more and more throughout the whole Christian Church. Yet even at this day, although the same person usually discharges both those offices, yet the office of an Evangelist or Teacher does not imply that of a Pastor, to whom peculiarly belongs the administration of the sacraments; neither among the Presbyterians, nor in the Church of England, nor even among the Roman Catholics. All Presbyterian Churches, it is well known, that of Scotland in particular, license men to preach before they are ordained, throughout that whole kingdom. And it is never understood that this appointment to preach gives them any right to administer the sacraments. Likewise in our own Church, persons may be authorized to preach, yea, may be Doctors of Divinity, (as was Dr. Alwood at Oxford, when I resided there,) who are not ordained at all, and consequently have no right to administer the Lord's Supper. Yea, even in the Church of Rome itself, if a lay-brother believes he is called to go a mission, as it is termed, he is sent out, though neither priest nor deacon, to execute that office, and not the other.

9. But may it not be thought that the case now before us is different from all these Undoubtedly in many respects it is. Such a phenomenon has now appeared as has not appeared in the Christian world before, at least not for many ages. Two young men sowed the word of God, not only in the churches, but likewise literally "by the high-way side;" and indeed in every place where they saw an open door, where sinners had ears to hear. They were members of the Church of England, and had no design of separating from it. And they advised all that were of it to continue therein, although they joined the Methodist society; for this did not imply leaving their former congregation, but only leaving their sins. The Churchmen might go to church still; the Presbyterian, Anabaptist, Quaker, might still retain their own opinions, and attend their own congregations. The having a real desire to flee from the wrath to come was the only condition required of them. Whosoever, therefore "feared God and worked righteousness" was qualified for this society.

10. Not long after, a young man, Thomas Maxfield, offered himself to serve them as a son in the gospel. And then another, Thomas Richards, and a little after a third, Thomas Westell. Let it be well observed on what terms we received these, viz., as Prophets, not as Priests. We received them wholly and solely to preach; not to administer sacraments. And those who imagine these offices to be inseparably joined are totally ignorant of the constitution of the whole Jewish as well as Christian Church. Neither the Romish, nor the English, nor the Presbyterian Churches, ever accounted them so. Otherwise we should never have accepted the service, either of Mr. Maxfield, Richards, or Westell.

11. In 1744, all the Methodist preachers had their first Conference. But none of them dreamed, that the being called to preach gave them any right to administer sacraments. And when that question was proposed, "In what light are we to consider ourselves" it was answered, "As extraordinary messengers, raised up to provoke the ordinary ones to jealousy." In order hereto, one of our first rules was, given to each Preacher, you are to do that part of the work which we appoint." But what work was this Did we ever appoint you to administer sacraments; to exercise the priestly office Such a design never entered into our mind; it was the farthest from our thoughts: And if any Preacher had taken such a step, we should have looked upon it as a palpable breach of this rule, and consequently as a recantation of our connexion.

12. For, supposing (what I utterly deny) that the receiving you as a Preacher, at the same time gave an authority to administer the sacraments; yet it gave you no other authority than to do it, or anything else, where I appoint. But where did I appoint you to do this Nowhere at all. Therefore, by this very rule you are excluded from doing it. And in doing it you renounce the first principle of Methodism, which was wholly and solely to preach the gospel.

13. It was several years after our society was formed, before any attempt of this kind was made. The first was, I apprehend, at Norwich. One of our Preachers there yielded to the importunity of a few of the people, and baptized their children. But as soon as it was known, he was informed it must not be, unless he designed to leave our Connexion. He promised to do it no more; and I suppose he kept his promise.

14. Now, as long as the Methodists keep to this plan, they cannot separate from the Church. And this is our peculiar glory. It is new upon the earth. Revolve all the histories of the Church, from the earliest ages, and you will find, whenever there was a great work of God in any particular city or nation, the subjects of that work soon said to their neighbours, "Stand by yourselves, for we are holier than you!" As soon as ever they separated themselves, either they retired into deserts, or they built religious houses; or at least formed parties, into which none was admitted but such as subscribed both to their

judgment and practice. But with the Methodists it is quite otherwise: They are not a sect or party; they do not separate from the religious community to which they at first belonged. They are still members of the Church; -- such they desire to live and to die. And I believe one reason why God is pleased to continue my life so long is, to confirm them in their present purpose, not to separate from the Church.

15. But, notwithstanding this, many warm men say, "Nay, but you do separate from the Church." Others are equally warm, because they say, I do not. I will nakedly declare the thing as it is.

I hold all the doctrines of the Church of England. I love her liturgy. I approve her plan of discipline, and only wish it could be put in execution. I do not knowingly vary from any rule of the Church, unless in those few instances, where I judge, and as far as I judge, there is an absolute necessity.

For instance: (1.) As few clergymen open their churches to me, I am under the necessity of preaching abroad.

(2.) As I know no forms that will suit all occasions, I am often under a necessity of praying extempore.

(3.) In order to build up the flock of Christ in faith and love, I am under a necessity of uniting them together, and of dividing them into little companies, that they may provoke one another to love and good works.

(4.) That my fellow-labourers and I may more effectually assist each other, to save our own souls and those that hear us, I judge it necessary to meet the Preachers, or at least the greater part of them, once a year.

(5.) In those Conferences we fix the stations of all the Preachers for the ensuing year.

But all this is not separating from the Church. So far from it that whenever I have opportunity I attend the Church service myself, and advise all our societies so to do.

16. Nevertheless as [to] the generality even of religious people, who do not understand my motives of acting, and who on the one hand hear me profess that I will not separate from the Church, and on the other that I do vary from it in these instances, they will naturally think I am inconsistent with myself. And they cannot but think so, unless they observe my two principles: The one, that I dare not separate from the Church, that I believe it would be a sin so to do; the other, that I believe it would be a sin not to vary from it in the points above mentioned. I say, put these two principles together, First, I will not separate from the Church; yet, Secondly, in cases of necessity I will vary from it (both of which I have constantly and openly avowed for upwards of fifty years,) and inconsistency vanishes away. I have been true to my profession from 1730 to this day.

17. "But is it not contrary to your profession to permit service in Dublin at Church hours For what necessity is there for this or what good end does it answer" I believe it answers several good ends, which could not so well be answered any other way. The First is, (strange as it may sound,) to prevent a separation from the Church. Many of our society were totally separated from the Church; they never attended it at all. But now they duly attend the Church every first Sunday in the month. "But had they not better attend it every week" Yes; but who can persuade them to it I cannot. I have strove to do it twenty or thirty years, but in vain. The Second is, the weaning them from attending Dissenting

Meetings, which many of them attended constantly, but have now wholly left. The Third is, the constantly hearing that sound doctrine which is able to save their souls.

18. I wish all of you who are vulgarly termed Methodists would seriously consider what has been said. And particularly you whom God hath commissioned to call sinners to repentance. It does by no means follow from hence that ye are commissioned to baptize, or to administer the Lord's Supper. Ye never dreamed of this, for ten or twenty years after ye began to preach. Ye did not then, like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, "seek the priesthood also." Ye knew, "no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron." O contain yourselves within your own bounds; be content with preaching the gospel; "do the work of Evangelists;" proclaim to all the world the lovingkindness of God our Saviour; declare to all, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand: Repent ye, and believe the gospel!" I earnestly advise you, abide in your place; keep your own station. Ye were, fifty years ago, those of you that were then Methodist Preachers, extraordinary messengers of God, not going in your own will, but thrust out, not to supersede, but to "provoke to jealousy" the ordinary messengers. In God's name, stop there! Both by your preaching and example provoke them to love and to good works. Ye are a new phenomenon in the earth, -- a body of people who, being of no sect or party, are friends to all parties, and endeavour to forward all in heart religion, in the knowledge and love of God and man. Ye yourselves were at first called in the Church of England; and though ye have and will have a thousand temptations to leave it, and set up for yourselves, regard them not. Be Church-of-England men still; do not cast away the peculiar glory which God hath put upon you, and frustrate the design of Providence, the very end for which God raised you up.

19. I would add a few words to those serious people who are not connected with the Methodists; many of whom are of our own Church, the Church of England. And why should ye be displeased with us We do you no harm; we do not design or desire to offend you in anything; we hold your doctrines; we observe your rules, more than do most of the people in the kingdom. Some of you are Clergymen. And why should ye, of all men, be displeased with us We neither attack your character, nor your revenue; we honour you for "your work's sake!" If we see some things which we do not approve of; we do not publish them; we rather cast a mantle over them, and hide what we cannot commend. When ye treat us unkindly or unjustly, we suffer it. "Being reviled, we bless;" we do not return railing for railing. O let not your hand be upon us!

20. Ye that are rich in this world, count us not your enemies because we tell you the truth, and, it may be, in a fuller and stronger manner than any others will or dare do. Ye have therefore need of us, inexpressible need. Ye cannot buy such friends at any price. All your gold and silver cannot purchase such. Make use of us while ye may. If it be possible, never be without some of those who will speak the truth from their heart. Otherwise ye may grow grey in your sins; ye may say to your souls, "Peace, peace!" while there is no peace! Ye may sleep on, and dream ye are in the way to heaven, till ye awake in everlasting fire.

21. But whether ye will hear, or whether ye will forbear, we, by the grace of God, hold on our way; being ourselves still members of the Church of England, as we were from the beginning, but receiving all that love God in every Church as our brother, and sister, and mother. And in order to their union with us we require no unity in opinions, or in modes of worship, but barely that they "fear God and work righteousness," as was observed. Now this is utterly a new thing, unheard of in any other Christian community. In what Church or congregation beside, throughout the Christian world, can members be admitted upon these terms, without any other conditions Point any such out, whoever can.

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