

# The Ministry of the Church

HAROLD E. FEY

## I.

**S**TATUS-SEEKING is not a modern invention. It nearly wrecked the first Christian fellowship. According to Mark, when Jesus started for Jerusalem he told his disciples his enemies would kill him there but after three days he would rise triumphant. The response of two disciples was to try to cash in on opportunity to "get ahead" when he triumphed. James and John, sons of Zebedee, privately begged Jesus to grant an unspecified request. He must have sensed a trick for he asked what they wanted. They urged him to give them places of priority when he triumphed. Jesus inquired if they could endure the suffering he had just described. They brashly said Yes, but he did not grant their request. The other disciples learned about the effort of the two to steal an advantage and quarreled with them.

Jesus heard the row and told his disciples to listen to him. He did not condemn status seeking, but he laid down a new rule for the very old game of status-seeking. This rule for status in the Christian ministry is still valid, even though it is widely flouted. "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many." (Mk 10:42ff).

In the first days of the church the word

which was used to cover the whole ministry was **diakonos**. It meant one who serves, or more literally, a waiter. The members of the first century church often ate together; the diakonos waited on table and later served in other ways. In time headwaiters appeared, as they have a way of doing. Long before the name **bishop** became a symbol of power, the bishop was the servant of the Lord's servants. Paul called himself **doulos**—the slave of Christ. Since Christ came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many, Paul would not allow himself to live at anybody else's expense, but earned his own living by the sailmaker's craft. He preached faith in Christ, hope in Christ, love through Christ and like Christ gave his own life a ransom for many.

In the first Christian generation the service of the waiters, the slaves of Christ, assumed various forms, most of which continue to this day. Some were **apostles**, men sent out to witness to God's purpose in Christ, whom they knew personally. This is still an essential mark of the ministry—personal acquaintance with the living Christ. By every means then possible, the first apostles conveyed the good news of God's mighty acts in Christ. They led in worship, strengthened Christian fellowship preached Christ and established companies of believers, baptized believers and observed the Lord's Supper, reconciled enemies within the churches and preached reconciliation outside them, visited the sick, cared for the needy, nurtured the churches. Others were **prophets**, whose capacity for vision centered in Christ, whose spiritual gifts centered in Christ, who were sensitive to God's call to the churches and had gifts in communicating God's will in the gospel. They were preachers great in their capacity for interpreting concretely the meaning of

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Christ for daily life. They had the ability to persuade others to share the vision splendid through faith, confession, repentance, baptism and worship. They also healed, consoled, reconciled, built, unified, encouraged.

Others were teachers, of whom the chief was the Lord himself. Their instruction was more consistent and objective than that of the prophets. Their concern was that each member of the Christian community should know all that Jesus began to do and teach, all that he suffered, what happened when he rose from the dead, what God had done to lead up to these events and what happened after them.

Other *diakonoi* were administrators and helpers, others were pastors and visitors to the sick and needy, others traveling evangelists, others speakers in tongues, others interpreters of speakers with tongues. If theologians and other scholars will allow us to classify them as speakers with tongues, whose utterances are translated for the church by ministers who are trained to do just that, we have all these kinds of *diakonoi* in the Christian ministry today. I need not point out that women served along with men in channeling God's grace to the world and the church in nearly all these ways, as they do today.

## II.

Today the ministry of Jesus Christ enlists hundreds of thousands of men and women in this country alone, and possibly two million others in every nation on earth. Yet much of the church seems to have forgotten Jesus words: "You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you." Systems of power have been set up by which the higher clergy rule the lower and the lower clergy exercise authority over the laity, who have their own "peck order" or hierarchy. On its tortuous way through history the bishopric has in places even taken on the pretensions of monarchy.

This corruption of power and wealth has spread through Christendom, and the church in this country is not immune to it. Today Protestants are asked to front for forms of urban community organization based on what is called "the power structure." Even when the Roman Catholic Church is correctly identified as the center of this structure, whose "power" is illusory and self-defeating, some Protestants naively accept this perversion of Christian standards, frequently awakening too late to loss of freedom and betrayal of Christian mission.

It is time we conduct an agonizing reappraisal of the ministry as seen in the light of Jesus Christ. The Master did not decry greatness. He did not downgrade dignity or status. Instead he showed where true greatness lies. He himself served the high purposes of God, who made no little plans. He made it clear that God's purpose was and is the salvation of all mankind. It was and is nothing less than the creation of a new earth and a new heaven. It did and does require the redemption, the inner change, the liberation from sin and smallness of every man, woman and child on earth. No vision can be greater than this.

God sent Jesus Christ to carry out this magnificent design. Christ summoned us to hear God's call to greatness. He pointed the way to greatness, to eminence, to the highest dignity, the most exalted service. He showed us how to resist tyranny; better still, he showed us the way to avoid becoming tyrants ourselves. He made us waiters, handymen, servants of servants, cleaning women, jacks of all Christian service trades. Paul stated our liberating mission "For Freedom Christ has set us free." "Freedom is no matter of laws and constitutions," said Plato. "Only he is free who realizes the divine order within himself, the true standard by which a man can steer and measure himself." God made us responsible as well as free—responsible for obedience unto the heavenly vision and free to leave the results to God, who guides the course of history so that some in each generation

have to hear and obey his call to greatness if any survive.

Calls to greatness thunder through the narrowing corridors of our generation, summoning the ministry to lead the church to be God's instrument for the salvation of mankind. If we are really servants, if we really seek to wait rather than to be waited upon, if we really share the greatness of the purpose of God, we shall set on fire the dry fuel of human aspiration with lightning from heaven. As Carlyle said: "The great man, with the free force direct out of God's own hands, is the lightning . . . The rest of men waited for him like fuel, and then they too would flame." The fuel is newly piled high in our day, and God summons his ministers to ignite it to illumine the future.

See a thing that the Lord has done! Nearly 200 years ago God powerfully moved men to go out as Christian missionaries when the industrial revolution was only beginning, at a time when nobody saw that soon changes in travel and communication would bring the world together. Through the work of these humble missionaries, God has given voice to more than a billion native people, hitherto silent, to cry for liberation from poverty, disease and ignorance, the "revolution of rising expectations" make them demand equality within the human family and in the United Nations. They seek education, the conquest of disease, a share in industrialization, equality of political and economic status all at once. They strain to break all at once the chains of color segregation, of segregation from the cultural heritage of mankind through illiteracy, of colonial subservience, of economic discrimination. Above all, they stretch forth their hands for a new kind of leadership from their own people—the new kind of person they have seen in the lives of those most dedicated, slaves of all, those most self-effacing servants of God, the Christian missionaries. The most high himself has summoned the silent billion to cry out, and he still summons his servants to answer their cry in

Christian teaching, healing, farming, industry, economic aid.

See a second thing the Lord has done! Through the conquest of disease by Christian medical servants and in other ways the population of the world has begun to increase very rapidly. Standing room only is only a few generations away. The population explosion requires men to help each other; to make the best use of resources in the interest of all; to take control of man's biological nature in the interest of a fuller life for all God's children. It requires men and women to bring their concern for humanity right into their homes and into their most intimate association. It requires cooperation between parents, doctors and ministers; between legislators and religious leaders and voters; between scientists and ordinary people. It makes the ministry of counseling an ever more essential part of the service of the church. In my lifetime strides were made in death control. In your lifetime strides must be made in life control. Nobody planned that it should be so, but here it is. This is the Lord's doing; it is also his summons to the ministry.

See a third thing the Lord has done! He has stimulated the minds of men so that in every field of science dramatic breakthroughs have been and are being made. Instantaneous communication, swift travel to the remotest places, the release of nuclear and other power resources, improvement of food, shelter, clothing, medical, and educational facilities—all this happening at once and in some degree all over the world. Nobody planned that it should happen simultaneously. What does God intend by allowing this to happen? We know his nature through Christ, so we know he means good and not evil. He intends powers that can be used for construction or destruction shall be used redemptively. He desires that they be used to build community. Four years ago Robert Oppenheimer publicly mourned that no international scientific community could be set up, for without such a community he

said man was doomed. But soon 30,000 scientists were collaborating in the International Geophysical Year. By working in a swiftly formed community they learned more in a year of cooperative study than they could have learned separately in a decade. This is a measure of the newly possible, of the work of the Lord in our time. It is a summons to his servants to cry: "Today is the day of salvation. Wash you, make you clean. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

See a fourth thing the Lord has done! He has fired the nations with a vision of truth and of the capacity of children to learn the truth which makes men free. Today the demand for education is universal. More children and youth are in school than ever before in history; greater resources of men and money are spent on education than ever before. The USSR is spending twice the proportion of its budget on education that we are; some of the smaller countries are spending three or four times the proportion of their resources we spend of ours. Since God is not jealous of truth but wants men to discover Him, he blesses this movement for learning. This revolution of the mind, which started in Protestant Christianity should be fostered by the churches in their concern for education, in schools of their own at home and abroad. One of the most propitious signs for Christian growth is the new drive for better theological education, at home and abroad, the parallel movement for better lay training in theology and churchmanship, the upgrading of church libraries, of ministers reading, of home libraries, the improvement of periodical literature and the keener conscience of ministers and churchmen that it be read.

### III

I have named only four of the mighty acts of God which summon servants of God to greatness in selfgiving. Never have preachers, prophets, teachers, healers, administrators, reconcilers, pastors, scholars of Christ's church had such op-

portunities for waiting on the table of the Lord. There are other calls to greatness in service too numerous to mention. They are heard in strange places—in places where short-sighted men stage crying jags for the dear old days.

One of these wailing walls is captioned "mobility." Everybody is moving around. Nobody holds still any more. We preach to processions. So what? A million Americans cross denominational lines each year. Glory to God! Christian unity is growing at "the grass roots." Heaven's will is served as denominations have to struggle harder and harder to maintain cherished peculiarities. Let fondly held sectarian shibboleths go! Meanwhile the true minister will see that and make sure his church does its best to ground his own pilgrims in the essentials of Bible, church doctrine and Christian experience before they move on.

Another wailing wall is labelled "politics." Once ours was a Protestant country; it is no longer. Instead of pretending that things have not changed when the Roman Catholic Church has 40 million members to 10 million for the most numerous Protestant church, we have to struggle to keep church and state really separate, to make sure this will never become a Roman Catholic country. We have to do this not by denying office to competent Catholics, but by really enforcing laws separating church and state. Such enforcement may hurt us as much as it hurts Rome, as in the case of released time, or federal funds for church hospitals. Integrity here gives us the right to battle sectarian intrusions into the work of the medical profession in respect to birth control, or federal funds for parochial schools. Politics is the process by which we put into effect or refuse to put into effect the ethical principles of the Christian faith. Every minister plays a part in political decisions and it is important that he learn by participation in community affairs how to play this part openly, honestly, intelligently and effectively; not as a ruler but as a servant of the Lord's servants.

Another wailing wall has the name "cold war." It is taken as the excuse for despair that anything effective can be done to improve the lot of man, for cowardice in the face of intrenched evil, for changing Christ's word that "All power has been given unto me in heaven and on earth" to "All power has been taken away from me by the dread circumstances of our time." Theologies of despair have taken the place of theologies of automatic progress. Once evil was ignored and sin was considered an old-fashioned word unfit for polite society. Now good is called evil and redemption, personal and social, is considered passé.

Once it was believed that "a god without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a cross." That was bad, but today some of our mentors seem to be saying that a God without love brought sinners without hope into a kingdom without salvation through the ministrations of Christ without a resurrection. A free and responsible ministry will hold fast to Christ and refuse to become impaled on either horn of this dilemma.

But even the cold war can serve the divine purpose if servants of Christ are to believe God's will still holds. Once the faith that God raised Christ from the dead swept the world. Once men and women who stood in daily danger of death sang and shouted their way to incredible victory. That can be repeated today. Samuel Johnson remarked that when a man knew he was going to be hanged, the knowledge was wonderfully helpful in clearing irrelevancies out of his mind and assisting him to concentrate on what was most important. We who stand in hourly peril of nuclear death can clear out irrelevancies and give ourselves to what is most important—love, justice, reconciliation. The cold war shrinks nationalistic pride, challenges our selfishness by making us aid others, indicts our color prejudice. Since it apparently cannot be ended by our unaided efforts, the cold war drives us to our

knees in prayer and prepares our minds to work for peace and to great peace as the gift of God. The minister's greatest service is to help despairing people see the hand of the Lord of history in our most baffling failures and dilemmas.

The summit conference has failed and the nation stands in great danger. If it becomes a contest in character assassination, if hysteria and mccarthyism reign, if charges of "appeasement," "soft on communism," "warmonger" and "neglecter of national defense" set the tone of our national discussion, the fabric of our national life will be torn asunder and our allies will lose confidence in us. Worse, the communists might be misled again into making a mistake such as they made in Korea, only one with more tragic consequences, and our allies into losing patience with us.

In this crisis, our churches should constitute a reconciling, calming influence. They can do that if ministers will remind people that the nation has nothing to fear if it trusts God and does what is right. Faith in God strengthens faith in those God loves. Instead of allowing our people to be carried away by suspicion, fear and hostility, we must summon the nation to steadiness under danger, to forbearance in judgment of our fellow citizens, to restraint in speech and conduct. In spite of danger, let us discuss freely national issues and candidates, let us have courage in decision making, let us have faith in God and in each other.

#### IV.

The work of waiter at the table of the Lord will always be associated with three words: commitment, identification, the cross. Commitment is the quality which brings the soul to life. Arthur Miller, the author of *Death of a Salesman* and other plays, was asked how he builds drama into his productions. He answered that everything that enters into the play—plot, characterization, business—all contribute to "that moment when a man differentiates himself from every other man, that moment when, out of a sky

full of stars, he chooses one star." This is the essence of freedom—the act of confessing Christ as **one's own** Savior and Lord. This is the moment of commitment, of going over the top in battle, of burning one's bridges behind one, of risking everything in one act of faith and dedication which is forever. The diakonos are committed men and women. But our commitment is not to a profession, not to a set of values, not to a culture or an ethos, not even to a way of life. It is not a commitment to a denomination, to an assembly or a fellowship. Our commitment is to Jesus Christ and to God through him who is our master and savior. Christ is the star we chose out of a sky full of stars. All other commitments are conditional on this one. As Herbert Butterfield says: "Hold fast to Jesus Christ, and for the rest, remain uncommitted."

Identification is a second essential characteristic of a true ministry. The servant is identified with his master and with his master's people. God's purposes, so far as he can know them, are his purposes. His people's welfare, so far as he understands it, is his concern. This is true in relation to the general community of Christians, but it is especially true of relation to a specific community of believers, a local church. The worst thing that can be said of a shepherd is that he is a hireling. The hireling's sin is not that he works for wages—we all do that. It is that he works for nothing more than wages. He runs away when the flock is endangered or when the treasurer fails to meet the payroll. A leading industrialist told Dartmouth students recently that no man can hold his integrity in business unless he is ready at any time to sacrifice security for principle. If true in business—doubly true in the church. The minister's identification with Christ and his people is not conditional, not temporary, not for sale.

The third essential to a true ministry is the cross. The cross is not merely the symbol of Christ's suffering. It is the actuality of suffering with Christ; vol-

untarily, deliberately chosen suffering. This is not an ornament set on a table or of jewelry worn on a chain; it is inward pain and physical affliction willingly undertaken and borne for Christ's sake. It is struggle over and beyond the call of duty. It is making the suffering of men our suffering; the sin of men our affliction; the sorrows of men, our sorrow. It is sharing the agonies of Christ over quarrels which take place among Christians; it is entering into his suffering when his body, the church, is physically torn apart by people who say they love him and are doing his will. It is the pain of rejection when Christ's ministry of reconciliation, offered through you, is met by rejection and contempt. It is continuing to try when discouragement over unworthy status-seeking among Christians like that which Jesus knew when the sons of Zebedee tried to steal an advantage over the other disciples, crops up. It is dying every day and Gethsemane prayers at night before troubled sleep.

Once a rich man asked: What can the cross possibly mean to me? He might have found his answer in the late John D. Rockefeller, Jr., who was also rich. Mr. Rockefeller lived a disciplined life. He struggled for 20 years to perfect the principles and instruments of philanthropy by which he could give away \$475 millions in confidence he was doing more good than harm. In so doing he pioneered and now hundreds of foundations build on his example. He worked hard and steadily at his calling. He learned from painful experiences. The Colorado Fuel and Iron strike of 1914 cost a dozen lives and made the name Rockefeller a hissing and a byword in labor circles for a generation. But Mr. Rockefeller did not become an enemy of organized labor. He patiently set about correcting what was wrong, not to redeem his tarnished name but to render justice. By modestly bearing his cross, by commitment to Christ and his church, by identification with God's purpose and the people who respond to God's call to them, this rich man offered us all an example. He said:

"The only justification of power is service." By the standards of the rest of the world or of any previous American generation, we are all rich. To serve God we too can take up our cross daily. We cannot serve him if we just stop trying and coast along.

We cannot consider the ministry and its sacrifices without recognizing that in the last ten years a sustained attack has been levelled on churches which cooperate with each other and on ministers who try to express Christian faith through action on economic and social issues. The object of this attack is to destroy these churches and to drive these ministers out of the ministry. The center of the attack is a group of extreme fundamentalists whose technique is to make charges that those who oppose them are soft on communism and untrue to the Bible. They get money from some very rich men. By combining charges of heresy and treason in reckless profusion, they have done great harm. By getting cooperation from the House Committee on Un-American Activities in spreading untrue and unprovable charges against men like Bishop Bromley Oxnam, they have secured what many people believe to be official sanction. They do not hesitate to commit the unconstitutional act of using an agency of government to advance their attack on the churches.

Only recently they suffered a stinging defeat in their attempt to infiltrate the Air Force Manual with suspicion-breeding falsehoods. But any man entering the ministry should expect he will have to suffer for his faith. He should resolve to suffer like a Christian, without hatred or complaint, for Christ's sake. He should fight lies with truth, hatred with love and suspicion with faith.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when he was about to die in a nazi concentration camp in 1945, wrote that "we are approaching an age of widespread persecution. Our adversaries seek to root out the Christian Church and the Christian faith because . . . they see in every word we utter and every deed we do a condemnation of their own words and deeds . . . We do not reciprocate their hatred and contention, although they would like it better if we would sink to their level. We shall pray . . . the prayer of earnest love for these very sons of perdition who stand around and gaze at us with eyes aflame with hatred . . . The church which is really waiting for its Lord . . . must fling itself with utmost power . . . with the panoply of its holy life into this prayer of love." "The church which is really waiting for its Lord" salutes you—I salute you, waiters of the Lord, sharers in his suffering and in his victory!

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