

ORDINATION IN THE METHODIST CHURCH (1960)

Preface

While drawing up this Statement the Committee has constantly borne in mind the statement on 'The Nature of the Christian Church according to the Teaching of the Methodists' approved by the Conference of 1937, and it strongly hopes that its findings are wholly in accord with that very important document. The close connexion between it and the present Report is shown by the following quotations: 'In the New Testament the ministry of the Word and Sacraments is a divine gift to the Church, and was in those early days an integral part of its organic life. It was a ministry within the Church, exercising in the name and by the authority of the Lord, who is the Head of the Church, powers and functions which are inherent in the Church' (pp. 23, 24). And again: 'While the true life of the Methodist Church consists in its fellowship with the whole Church of God, it possesses those marks whereby, since the days of the Apostles, the Church has been known of men. Such are: the possession and acknowledgment of the Word of God as given in the Scripture, and as interpreted by the Holy Spirit to the Church and to the individual; the profession of faith in God as He is incarnate and revealed in Christ; the observance of the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; and a ministry for the pastoral office, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments' (p. 37).

The Ordination Service, of course, has much light to throw on the teaching of the Methodist Church on this subject; and the Address of the President (the Rev Dr Eric W Baker) to the Ministerial Session of the Conference of 1959 is an impressive exposition of the doctrine which this statement attempts to summarize.

The main concern of this statement is to bring out the significance of Ordination as it is to be seen in accepted Methodist teaching and in the practice of the Methodist Church, and to invite the Church to the further study of this vitally important matter, so that our spiritual understanding of the ministry, which is the gift of Christ to His Church, may be enlarged and deepened.

THE MINISTRY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament, whose teaching is normative on this as on all subjects, prescribes no exclusive and invariable form of the Christian ministry, though it clearly regards this ministry as integral to the Church. In fact, the pattern of the ministry which we find in it is so complex that most of the historic Church orders of Christendom can claim some support from it. It is the Church – described both as the People of God and as the Body of Christ – which is the ruling conception. Through this Church Christ Himself, who took 'the form of a servant' and 'came not to be ministered unto, but to minister', continues His ministry in the world. For the exercise of this ministry the Holy Spirit endows members of the Church with various 'charismata', free gifts springing from God's abundant grace, by which they are empowered to fulfil the ministry's manifold functions, of preaching, teaching, healing, administration and pastoral care (I Cor. xii. 28; Ephesians iv. 11, 12). Thus within the ministry of the Church there are various 'manifestations of the Spirit' for the building up of the Body of Christ. The Apostles received from the risen Christ the commission to preach the Gospel in all the world, to teach the truth as the truth is in Jesus, and to

have the oversight and care of the Churches. Some Christians were called and empowered by the Spirit to be 'prophets', inspired preachers of the Word of God; to others was given by the Spirit the authority to superintend, feed and shepherd the flock of God; others, again, were authorized to give instruction in the Christian way of life, others to evangelize far and wide, others to care for the poor and sick. And one man might well be called to fulfil more than one of these various 'ministries'.

There is evidence in the New Testament of the appointment by St Paul and others of boards of 'presbyters', who are also called 'Bishops', to exercise leadership and pastoral care in the local Churches (Acts xiv. 23; Phil.i, 1). We know that these men had the care and discipline of the local Churches in their hands; it is natural to suppose that they presided over worship and administered the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, except when a visiting Apostle or prophet was invited to do so. These 'presbyter-bishops' appointed by St Paul may well have continued to work at their original occupations and may not have received any payment for their ministerial work; yet the principle of a ministry financially supported by the Church is already recognized in the New Testament (I Cor. ix, 3-14).

THE MINISTRY IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

By a process which it is not possible to ascertain with exactitude, the ministry of the presbyter-bishops had become by the end of the second century the three-fold ministry of bishops, presbyters and deacons. These were now three orders of ministry: the bishop exercised oversight within a given area, the presbyters had the care of individual Churches, the deacons, who had previously been associated with the 'presbyter-bishops' and administered the distribution of alms, were now personal assistants of the bishop. The presbyters were coming to be called 'priests' (although the word is never used of an individual Christian in the New Testament), possibly because the Lord's Supper was by this time often thought of chiefly in sacrificial terms.

The three-fold ministry became part of the Church's tradition and remained the rule until the Reformation. The bishops played a great part in the expansion and defence of the Church before and after the collapse of the Roman Empire, but the Middle Ages witnessed serious corruptions in the exercise of episcopal and priestly power which led the great Reformers to rediscover and emphasise the truth that the words 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation' in I Peter ii. 9 refer to the whole body of believers, not to any group of men distinguishable from it. Thus they spoke with great emphasis of 'the priesthood of all believers'; they meant by this not only that every individual Christian has direct access to God through Jesus Christ and is charged with the task of bringing men and women to Jesus Christ, but also that the Church as a whole has received from Christ the task of continuing His ministry, and the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit enabling it to do so. They taught that some within the 'priesthood of all believers', which is the Church, are called and empowered to preach, to administer the sacraments, to tend the flock of God, and to exercise authority and discipline; and these carry out their functions as ambassadors of God and representatives of His People. Some of the Churches of the Reformation retained the three-fold ministry; most of them restored, in effect, the New Testament ministry of the 'presbyter-bishops'. The 'bishops', 'presidents', 'moderators' and 'superintendents' of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches for the most part claim to exercise no higher ministry than other ordained ministers. Some of the Reformation Churches retain the office of 'deacon' for the exercise of various pastoral and administrative functions

within the one ministry. Here, as in the New Testament, 'there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are diversities of workings, but the same God who worketh all in all. But to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal' (1 Cor. xii. 4-7).

THE MINISTRY IN METHODISM

The Methodist Church has always sought to follow the New Testament teaching and practice in respect of the ministry, which were reaffirmed by the Reformation, though it passes no judgment on the ministry of other Churches.

'Christ's Ministers in the Church are Stewards in the household of God and Shepherds of His flock. Some are called and ordained to this sole occupation and have a principal and directing part in these great duties but they hold no priesthood differing in kind from that which is common to the Lord's people and they have no exclusive title to the preaching of the gospel or the care of souls. These ministries are shared with them by others to whom also the Spirit divides His gifts severally as He wills.

'It is the universal conviction of the Methodist people that the office of the Christian ministry depends upon the call of God who bestows the gifts of the Spirit the grace and fruit which indicate those whom He has chosen.

'Those whom the Methodist Church recognizes as called of God and therefore receives into its Ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the Minister's personal call. The Methodist Church holds the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and consequently believes that no priesthood exists which belongs exclusively to a particular order or class of men but in the exercise of its corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized.

'The Preachers itinerant and lay are examined, tested and approved before they are authorized to minister in holy things. For the sake of Church Order and not because of any priestly virtue inherent in the office the Ministers of the Methodist Church are set apart by ordination to the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments' (The Deed of Union, C.P.D., p. 265).

The Methodist Church believes that its ministry is ordered in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. There is a single ordained ministry equivalent to that of the 'presbyter-bishops' in the New Testament. The many gifts of the Spirit are distributed among members of the Church in various offices. The Methodist ministry has its own special history. Soon after 1738 John Wesley gathered a body of preachers to assist him. A few of them were clergymen of the Church of England, but most of them were laymen. He described them as 'extraordinary Messengers' and strongly defended their right to preach, though this, like his own way of treating the whole world as his parish, was a departure from the prevailing customs of the Church of England, and thus paved the way for a new type of ministry. But he did not regard them (with the exception of a small number who were clergymen of the Church of England) as having any authority to administer the sacraments. They were eventually divided into (a) Travelling Preachers in Full Connexion with the Conference which Wesley had instituted, (b) Preachers on Trial for such Full Connexion, and (c) Local Preachers.

In 1784, in order to meet the pastoral and sacramental needs of the people of North America, Wesley put into practice views which he had long held about Church Order, and ordained men with the imposition of hands as 'deacons' and 'elders', and in the same way set one man apart as 'superintendent' for America. Later he took similar steps for Scotland, but without the superintendency, and for England with the superintendency. But in 1795 the Plan of Pacification sanctioned the administration of the sacraments by the travelling preachers where this was desired locally, subject to the consent of the Conference; and it soon became the general practice for the travelling preachers to be authorized to administer them. Thus Methodism acknowledged that it had acquired the character of a Church, and that its travelling preachers performed the usual functions of Christian ministers. They were sometimes ordained with the imposition of hands, especially if they were going overseas, but usually their Reception into Full Connexion was regarded as tantamount to ordination.

When, therefore, the Wesleyan Conference of 1836 resolved that the men to be admitted into Full Connexion should be ordained with the imposition of hands, the ground commonly given for this decision was that Admission into Full Connexion was in essence ordination, and that the imposition of hands was but a circumstance of it, which as it was scriptural, it was better not to omit. At some later date, the two stages, viz., Reception into Full Connexion and ordination with the imposition of hands, were distinguished, as they are now, though not usually separated by any great interval of time.

In the other Methodist Connexions ordination was rarely accompanied by the imposition of hands; in most of them, never. In the Primitive Methodist Connexion ordination was performed at the District Meeting; in the other Connexions, mostly at the Conference. In all these Connexions the same general pattern emerged, but with minor variations. After careful selection and years of training and probation the candidate reached the final stage: the appropriate Church Court, whether Conference or District Meeting, voted that he 'be received into full connexion', or admitted to the approved list', or some equivalent phrase. The ordination followed, often on the evening of the same day, at a public service which was often regarded as also an official session of the Conference or District Meeting: the ordination included prayer and usually some such outward sign as the presentation of the Ordination Bible and the giving of the right hand of fellowship. The general conception of the itinerant ministry was common to them all.

The present Methodist ministry is heir to the traditions of all these Conferences, and it may fairly be said that Methodist Ministers are both travelling preachers in the Methodist Connexion and Ministers of the Word and Sacraments in the Church of God. They have authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, and they normally exercise pastoral care in a number of local congregations. They thus constitute a ministry which corresponds to that of the presbyter-bishops of the New Testament. Some of the 'charismata' of the Holy Spirit which in the New Testament period were widely distributed over the members of the Church are now ordinarily exercised in Methodism by the ordained ministry, but they are also bestowed by the Spirit on those who are outside the ordained ministry. The Reformation office of 'deacon', closely corresponding to the New Testament 'diaconos', is held among us by the various kinds of 'stewards', who are called to perform their stewardship to the glory of God and the building up of the Church. Chairmen of Districts and Superintendents of Circuits, though they have additional functions to those of the ordained ministry in general, have the same ministry as the rest.

ORDINATION IN THE METHODIST CHURCH

If a man believes himself to be divinely called to the office of a Minister of Christ's Church within the Methodist Church, he is required to submit his call to be tested by the Methodist Church. Without such a call, no man can be a true Minister of the Church; it is the task of the Church to verify a man's call, and the gifts and graces needed for its fulfilment. This is done, not only by examination, but by the consent of the people of God, through the Quarterly Meeting, the ministerial session of the District Synod, the Service of Public Testimony, and the Conference. If the Church is thus able to confirm a man's call, it accepts him as a candidate for the ministry, and appoints him to a period of training in College, the greater part of which is spent in the study of the Bible, theology, the history of the Church and the principles and practice of pastoral work. After a probationary period of exercising pastoral and administrative responsibility under the supervision of a Superintendent Minister, and the further testing of his character and ability, he is received into Full Connexion with the Methodist Conference by a standing vote of the Conference, and ordained with the laying on of hands by the President of the Conference, or a representative of the President, with other Ministers assisting. The Reception into Full Connexion and the Ordination Service ordinarily take place within a few hours of each other. It should be noted, however, that in order to meet exceptional cases it sometimes happens that men serving in the Methodist Church overseas are ordained some months after being received into Full Connexion, while those in the three Welsh Districts are ordained at the Welsh Assembly some time before being received into Full Connexion.

THE ORDINATION SERVICE

The Ordination Service, held in the presence of a congregation of the Methodist people, usually on the evening of the day on which the Candidates for ordination have been received into Full Connexion with the Conference, begins with a hymn of praise and a prayer for the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. Then passages from Holy Scripture are read as a declaration of the nature, dignity and importance of the ministerial office. The President or his appointed representative reminds the candidates that they are 'chosen and elect to be evangelists of the grace of God in Christ Jesus,' and admonishes them to use all prayer and diligence in the fulfilment of this task, so that they may bring those committed to their charge unto 'true conversion of heart' and 'perfectness of love in Christ'; to this end he urges them to give themselves wholly to their office and to direct all their cares and studies towards it, praying always for the help of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification of their lives and the lives of the members of their families. Then the Candidates make personal profession of their divine call, of their conviction that Holy Scripture contains all truth necessary for salvation, and of their determination to teach nothing contrary to it, to drive away all error, and to administer faithfully the doctrines, sacraments and discipline of the Gospel; they further avow their acceptance of Methodist doctrine and their willingness to submit themselves 'as sons in the Gospel' to those appointed by the Methodist Church to rule over them. They pledge themselves to be diligent in prayer, Bible study and the fashioning of their lives to be 'wholesome examples' to the flock of Christ, to further peace within the Church, to encourage its members to exercise the gifts of grace which are in them and to stir up their own gifts as the Spirit shall bestow them. Then after continued prayer the President or his representative, and the assisting Ministers, lay their hands on the Candidates one by one with the words 'Mayest thou receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a Christian Minister and Pastor, now committed unto thee by the imposition of our hands. And be thou a faithful Dispenser

of the Word of God, and of His Holy Sacraments, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.' A Bible is given to each Candidate with the words 'Take thou authority to fulfil the office of a Minister in the Church of Christ.' Then the President or his representatives declare the Candidates 'to be ordained to the office of the Holy Ministry'. After a further exhortation those who have been ordained receive the Sacrament of the Holy Communion, and a solemn charge is given to them.

The ministry is God's gift to His Church, and the persistent prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit is a distinguishing mark of the whole service.

The nature of ordination in the Methodist Church is to be understood in accordance with the relevant clauses of the Deed of Union. In the 'Interpretation' of various terms used in the Deed, the 'Interpretation' being itself part of the Deed, we find: 'The expression "Minister" means a minister of the Methodist Church admitted to Full Connexion' (CPD p. 252). The Deed goes on to state that 'The Methodist Church claims and cherishes its place in the Holy Catholic Church which is the Body of Christ' (CPD p. 264); and further: 'Those whom the Methodist Church recognizes as called of God and therefore receives into its Ministry shall be ordained by the imposition of hands as expressive of the Church's recognition of the Minister's personal call' (CPD p. 265). So the Ordination Service contains the words, addressed to the Ordinand at the imposition of hands: 'Take thou authority to fulfil the office of a Minister in the Church of Christ'. Thus Ministers of the Methodist Church are Ministers, not of the Methodist Church only, but of the Holy Catholic Church. The Methodist Church recognizes a man's divine call to the ministry, and he himself becomes a Minister, by a process in which Reception into Full Connexion and the Ordination Service are integral parts of the whole.

The act of making a man a Minister is performed by the Methodist Conference, by its standing vote in the Reception into Full Connexion and through its appointed representatives in the Ordination Service; it is not performed by individuals, or a group of individuals, acting in their own capacity. Similarly, the ordained Minister (as we may properly style the man who has been called of God to the ministry, received into full connexion and ordained), exercises his ministry thereafter as the representative of the Church; as the Deed states, 'in the exercise of the Church's corporate life and worship special qualifications for the discharge of special duties are required and thus the principle of representative selection is recognized' (CPD p. 265). This 'principle of representative selection' is inherent in the Protestant Reformation, to the fundamental principles of which the Methodist Church is committed by the Deed (CPD p. 264).

By reception into Full Connexion and Ordination the office of a Minister and Pastor in the Church of God is conferred. The ordained Minister enters fully upon the status, duties and privileges of the Methodist ministry. He is called to be a Steward in the household of God and a Shepherd of His flock, and the exercise of this ministry is his sole occupation (CPD p. 265). But the distinguishing mark of a Methodist Minister is not simply that he is a full-time worker in the Church. Others, not ordained, are also full-time workers in the Church. The ordained Minister has also a principal and directing part in those spiritual activities, preaching the Word, and pastoral care, which he shares with lay members of the Church. In the office of a Minister are brought together the manifold functions of the Church's ministry, and it is his privilege to exercise them as the servant of Christ and of his fellows in the Church as a whole, as the Church under the guidance of the Spirit shall appoint him; for this he is set apart at the call of Christ, and commits himself to the Church's discipline, that he may give

himself wholly to the demanding and yet glorious 'work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ' (Eph. iv. 12).

The ordained Minister has full authority to administer the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Deaconesses, Probationers, Lay Pastors, Local Preachers and other laymen are entitled to administer this Sacrament only when especially authorized by a temporary Dispensation of the Conference; the ordained Minister is entitled by his ordination.

The Methodist Church is committed to the view that the ordained Minister does not possess any priesthood which he does not share with the whole company of Christ's faithful people. But the doctrine of the 'priesthood of all believers' is that we share, as believers, in the priesthood of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ Himself. As our High Priest He sacrificed Himself, a faultless offering, in utter obedience to God and infinite love for man, for the cleansing of our sins and our reconciliation to God; His sacrifice was made once for all, but it is for ever efficacious, and He for ever makes intercession on our behalf. Into that priesthood of Christ we are taken up by faith, and we in our turn, and in self-identification with Him, offer ourselves in utter humility and obedience as a living sacrifice to God. We are 'priests unto God', and therefore 'take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience', as we are enjoined in the Covenant Service. So the doctrine does not mean that every Christian has the right to exercise every function and administer both sacraments. For it is not an assertion of claims, but a declaration of our total obedience. A Methodist Minister is a priest, in company with all Christ's faithful people; but not all priests are Ministers.

Ordination is never repeated in the Methodist Church.

A Minister is Christ's ambassador and the representative of the whole people of God. Called of God to his high and responsible office, equipped by the Spirit with the gifts necessary for its fulfilment, and supported by the prayers and confidence of the Church, he is charged with a special responsibility for guarding the truth of the Gospel and communicating it to others; for this he is trained and prepared by his work in College and by his continued study of the Bible and the Faith throughout the years of his ministry. He is the confidant, often the sole confidant, of his people in many kinds of trouble, and he mediates to them the pity and the care of God. He shares with them their highest joys and their deepest sorrows. In a special sense, too, adding his own spiritual resources, as they are built up by prayer and study and meditation, to the far greater spiritual resources of the Church, he leads the prayer and worship of God's people. And, in the name of Christ, he offers to those who 'truly and earnestly repent' and 'draw near with faith' the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper in remembrance of His death and passion, and leads them in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and of themselves to God which is the Church's response to the sacrifice of Himself made once for all by Jesus Christ.

(Minutes 1960, pp. 235-42)

The Conference adopted the report substituting 'administer' and 'administration' for 'celebrate' and 'celebration' throughout.