

WOMEN AND THE MINISTRY.

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IT is reported that Dr. Johnson once remarked, "Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." Yet there have been notable women preachers in the past, even as there are successful female preachers in our own days. The Evangelical Revival afforded an opportunity of soul-winning by preaching, and women played no unimportant part in it. That movement is rich in the names of women who helped to change the religious life of England by their ministry.

This activity is the direct outcome of the elevated position of women under Christianity. No movement, religious or social, has ever raised women to a level equal to that on which the Christian faith has placed them. There may be isolated instances of a higher position reached by them or given to them, such as the mothers of Sparta and the women rulers of antiquity. The Queen of Sheba and Candace of Ethiopia, to instance but two, are outstanding examples; but the ordinary level was low. There can be no doubt that by His teaching and example Christ put women on to a much higher plane than they had previously occupied. He broke down many barriers and destroyed many prejudices, as in His conversation with the woman at the well of Sychar, and that unfortunate woman taken in adultery. By emphasising the value of personality in God's sight, Our Lord proclaimed the equality of the sexes. This is noticeable in His dealings with divorce, for He left nothing to man's caprice. Both husband and wife were equally bound by the moral law.¹

Following his Lord, St. Paul emphasised the fact of equality in Christ. "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus."² This was a tremendous advance, especially for St. Paul, whose outlook sometimes seems stern. It is indeed as Dr. Inge says: "The most radical difference, that implanted by nature herself in distinguishing the sexes, is seen to be irrelevant when our business is with immortal souls."³

This spiritual equality before God is further emphasised when one considers that the priestly functions of the priestly people of God are the prerogative of the whole Church. Within that body all are equal, and each member of Christ has a ministry which is peculiarly his own. The parable of the Talents shows this, and in addition there is His word, "ye shall be my witnesses."⁴ Here is a ministry for all believers, men and women alike; the ministry of witness.

Ministry may mean either the act of ministering, serving, aiding

¹ See St. Matt. v. 31-2; xix. 3-12.

² Gal. iii. 28.

³ *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 287.

⁴ Acts i. 8.

or helping, or the office or function of a minister of the Gospel. The term comes to us from the Greek through the Latin, and originally implied waiting at table, so its central thought is that of service. Consequently, ministry may be either of a general nature, or of a particular kind as that to which one is set apart by ordination.

It is well known that women frequently exercised certain forms of ministry in pagan systems, but those offices were often of a nature which degraded rather than elevated their holders. There were the Vestal Virgins who were a kind of priestesses to Vesta, the goddess of the domestic hearth. Their duties were to keep the sacred fires burning and offer prayers daily for the Roman state. Among the Papyri discovered in Memphis are letters from two girls, twins, who acted as attendants in the Serapeum, and show that they had certain offices and duties given to them within the Temple.

In the Old Testament we do not read of women performing priestly functions. There were periods of degeneracy when pagan influences wrought harm amongst the people of Israel, and the prophets condemned these with no uncertain voice, for they were frequently related to forms of oriental nature worships in which women played a part, and led to spiritual and moral decay. The prophetic office was held occasionally by women, and one woman figures amongst the Judges.¹

The New Testament mentions various types of ministries. Some are quite general in scope, others are more particularly defined. During our Lord's lifetime there were the women who ministered of their substance both to Him and His disciples.² This was a general kind of ministry in which all could share. A more specialised ministry, in that its scope was clearly defined, is to be found in that to which both the twelve and the seventy were appointed.³ After the Ascension, when the Church began to expand, its ministries were all regarded as contributing to one great purpose, whether they were general ministries or more specially defined spheres of activity. All were given "for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ."⁴ It is noticeable, however, that there were no women apostles and that the elders of the Church were all men. This was in accordance with the invariable custom of the Synagogues, on which model the Christian services and administration largely were developed. There were prophetesses in the early church as instanced by Philip's daughters,⁵ and St. Paul's regulations for prophesying within the Church in his first letter to the Corinthians.⁶ Some women evidently found a ministry in the instruction of converts, for we find Priscilla helping her husband Aquila in that work, but it does not appear to have been a ministry conferred by ordination. There was evidently an order of Widows and an order of Deaconesses in the Apostolic Church. Of these, little beyond the general fact of their

¹ Ezekiel viii. 14; Jeremiah xlv.

² St. Luke ix. 1, x. 1.

³ Acts xxi. 9.

⁴ St. Luke viii. 3.

⁵ Eph. iv. 12.

⁶ 1 Cor. xi. 5 and Chap. xiv.

existence is known. Some have thought that Phœbe, who is mentioned in Rom. xvi. 1, was a deaconess, but her duties seem to have been those of a general ministry to the needs of the Church, similar to the work of those who ministered to the Saviour and His disciples. This thought is strengthened by the fact that St. Paul speaks of her ministry in terms similar to that of his appreciation of Stephanas and his household in Corinth.¹ Bishop Lightfoot looked on the female diaconate as being quite as definite an institution as that of the male diaconate. In his Dissertation on "The Christian Ministry" he says, "we find St. Paul in the First Epistle to Timothy giving express directions as to the qualifications of men-deacons and women-deacons alike."² He also reminds us that the reason for the admission of women into the diaconate was because of "the strict seclusion of the female sex in Greece and in some Oriental countries" which "necessarily debarred them from the ministrations of men."³ In thinking on this matter it is well to bear in mind that the office of deacon was largely of a secular character; we shall thus avoid some possible confusion.

How far the order of widows and the order of deaconesses were merged one into the other is not quite clear at first, but in the *Pastoral Epistles* they appear to be quite separate. Originally the widows seem to have been dependents or pensioners; people who would now be living in almshouses. But in the first epistle to Timothy they are spoken of as having been enrolled as Church servants, and the qualifications for enrolment are clearly defined.⁴ The widows figured largely in the sub-apostolic age. "They were maintained by the Church; and in return served it by instant prayer and works of charity."⁵ At a later period it seems that, as an order, the widows were merged into that of deaconesses.

It is striking that so great an advance was made in the apostolic age. The leaders of the Christian Church were reared in an atmosphere of Judaism where women were despised to some extent, and the Rabbis regarded it as a disgrace to be seen talking with them. The New Testament as a whole, including St. Paul, places women on a very high level, but the thought of a female apostolate or presbyterate would have been abhorrent to the Apostle. In his general attitude with regard to the activity of women within the Church and its worship, we must remember that he was most probably influenced by the thought of his time.

In the first Christian centuries deaconesses must have been very active, especially in the exercise of good works amongst their own sex. This was noticeable to Christians and Non-Christians alike. Writing to the Emperor Trajan from Bithynia, Pliny says: "I thought it the more necessary, therefore, to find out what truth there was in these statements by submitting two women, who were called deaconesses, to the torture, but I found nothing but a debased superstition carried to great lengths." Evidences of their work

¹ 1 Cor. xvi. 15-17.

² Phil., p. 191.

³ Horton, *Pastoral Epistles*, p. 126.

⁴ Phil., p. 191.

⁵ 1 Tim. v. 9-16.

are frequently found in the writings of the Fathers, and some advanced to positions of high distinction in the churches of the Eastern Empire. Their work would be very necessary in the baptism of women, especially adults, where the whole body was anointed. They also carried the elements at Communion to the sick, as did the men deacons. This was the custom, for Justin writes in his apology, "there is a distribution, and a partaking by everyone of the Eucharistic elements; and to those who are not present they are taken by the hands of the deacons." When a period of decline overtook the Church, we find that the deaconesses extended their sphere of labours and encroached upon the ministerial duties of the Christian Priesthood. "Amongst other indications of the confusion and demoralisation characteristic of the fifth century must be included that of laxity of Church discipline which permitted the performance of public religious rites to be sometimes entrusted to women."¹ This was a period of decadence in Christian history, and the fact that women were allowed to act as priests at the altars shows the state of contempt into which religion had fallen. Complaints against the practice go to show that such a custom was a new thing, and not the normal function of women. With the foundation of nunneries, and the enforced celibacy of the "religious," nuns were placed on a higher level than that of the married women, even though marriage was declared to be a sacrament.

The Reformation wrought a great change, and married life came to be viewed as the natural sphere in which a woman could realise her true vocation in God's service. Most women find their calling within the home, and blessed is that home over which a Christian mother presides along with a Christian father. No one will attempt to deny the great contribution which sanctified womanhood has given to the world through the Christian home.

An outcome of the Evangelical Revival, however, has been the opening up of fresh fields of Christian service for women. Wesley said: "God owns women in the conversion of sinners, and who am I that I should withstand God." Throughout the nineteenth century and up to our own day the sphere of women's work has been widening, but it has largely been a lay ministry. The Free Churches have opened the ranks of their ordained ministry to women, and to-day a woman presides over the destinies of the Salvation Army.

During the Industrial Revolution, the exodus from country to town created a problem for our own Church. Dense masses in our towns were largely unshepherded. Here was an opportunity for women free from outside claims to exercise a kind of pastoral ministry, and in 1862 Elizabeth Ferard was ordained by Bishop Tait of London. Since that time Bishops have ordained women to the female Diaconate. To-day, the order is recognised throughout the whole Church of England and the Lambeth Conference of 1920 gave the lead in that recognition. Colleges for the training of deaconesses are now in existence and recognised examinations have

¹ Art. "Women" in *Dictionary of Christian Antiquities*.

been drawn up to ensure a standard of education before ordination. The Diaconate is looked upon as a life-long dedication to God, and whilst marriage is not forbidden nor celibacy enjoined, it is evident that such a state is not contemplated. Further, the Diaconate is not looked upon as a step to the Priesthood as it is with men.

A vast sphere of ministry is now open to Women. It is found in teaching, nursing, prison work, rescue work, various forms of after care, social work, women's fellowships, Mothers' Union, district visiting, secretaryships, and countless more in committee work within the parish, rural deanery, diocese and National Assembly. In the Mission Field opportunities for service are almost legion, especially in Moslem and Hindu regions where women are accessible only by women.

With regard to the ordained ministry some would have the Church open up every avenue to women. Our Church has gone no further than the recognition of the female diaconate, saying that it is "for women the only order of the ministry which has the stamp of apostolic approval, and is for women the only order of the ministry which . . . the Church of England as a branch of the Catholic Church can recognise and use." Looking at the matter from every point of view this seems to be a wise provision. Without going into further details, it might be pointed out that the best practical way of approach to the matter seems to be from the complementary character of the sexes toward each other, and not the defence of the one, nor yet the claims or possible encroachments of the other. The whole question of women's work within the Church does not appear to be one of office or doctrine, but of manners, seemliness and actual need. Whatever avenues of activity are available, the work involved should be framed on womanly and comely lines "unto the building up of the body of Christ."

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