



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“Why is it that leaders and preachers in the Church of Christ do not refer to themselves as ‘the Minister,’ the ‘Reverend,’ or ‘the Priest,’ etc., or do they secretly like these titles even though they do not use them?”

I understand that this question was posed to a brother by someone who is not a member of the church. Some people evidently take exception to the fact that there are Christians who simply want to say that they are members of the Church of Christ. Such people think that because we do not use sectarian names we are being exclusive and egotistical, and that we are somehow suggesting that we are inevitably right and that all others who profess christianity are inevitably wrong. This is far from the truth, but what we do say is that if by using Bible names we become exclusive, then we are glad to be exclusive. It was the Lord who answered Peter’s confession by saying, “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church” (Matt. 16:16). The ‘rock’ was the truth of Peter’s confession. “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God”; the personal possessive pronoun identifies the Church as the

Church of Christ. It was the Christ who named His Church in this *exclusive* sense; it was the same Christ who made His Church *all-inclusive*, "whosoever will may come."

Furthermore, we look to the Bible for a definition of the terms we should use for certain individuals within the Church who have to perform specific duties. When these definitions do not coincide with the titles used by other religious groups, we must not be misunderstood if we say that we wish to accept the authority of the Bible in this respect; indeed, we prefer to accept the authority of the Bible in *all* respects. So then, why do our leaders prefer not to use the titles 'Reverend,' or 'Vicar,' or any other similar title? We must look to the Bible for the answer to that.

The Ministry

There are those who say that they have been 'called to the Ministry,' as if this were some peculiar office in the Church rather than the 'service' to which all Christians are called. We find even in non-conformist circles that particular deference is paid to those who have been 'ordained' to what is called 'the Ministry,' and furthermore, we are aware that the 'episcopacy' has stood in the way of a true alliance between those who endorse it and those who refuse it. The word 'bishop' as used in a number of religious groups today, and which means a superintendent pastor set over other pastors, cannot properly translate the word 'episcopos' as it is used in the N.T.

History does not tell us a lot about the organisation of the primitive christian community from about A.D.70 until the turn of the century, but it seems fairly clear that the first type of rule in the Church was Apostolic, with James at the head of affairs, along with Peter and John, "who seemed to be pillars" (Gal. 2:9). Polycarp of Smyrna in his writings (to Philippi) shows a picture of a well ordered community, with its presbyters and deacons each occupying the appointed function. It was a Christian community concerned with its own life, with the spread of the gospel, and with the maintenance of the purity of the doctrine, and completely unconcerned with worldly affairs. This God-given order was not to last, however, for during the following two or three centuries the internal struggles for power within the Church, with the chief protagonists being centred in Rome, Carthage, and Alexandria, was to rend the Church into East and West factions, the west becoming predominant with its seat of power in Rome, its bishops claiming apostolic succession, and its clergy and liturgy firmly established. It is quite natural that the episcopacy should have developed as it has, and that there should be a distinction between clergy and laity; it is quite natural, we say, *but it is not scriptural*.

The Christian Ministry

This ministry is both mutual and general. It is as the N.T. depicts it, and as the first christian communities practiced it. The word used is 'diakonia' and means 'service.' This is well illustrated in Eph. 4:12 where Paul says that special functions were given, "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ." J. B. Phillips renders this verse, "His gifts were made that Christians might be properly equipped for their service, that the whole body might be built up." Here Paul is speaking not in the sense of an ecclesiastical function, but in the general and mutual sense of that service which different parts of the body exhibit, so that 'the body grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work' (v16 N.I.V.). Therefore we conclude that ever member of the Church is a minister; the Body of Christ, the Church, functions by that "which every joint supplieth."

The work of a deacon has never been in serious dispute. The problem associated with Church Order has always revolved around the office of bishop; perhaps this is

because more credence has been given to the writings of the early Fathers rather than of the text of the N.T. These writings were apocryphal and therefore non-canonical, i.e., they were not included in the Bible as part of the canon or scripture. One of these documents was written by Clement of Rome and is known as the First Epistle of Clement. It seems that Clement was steeped in the writings of the Septuagint and was also a strong adherent of the moral and ethical code of Judaism. Clement obviously regarded the Christian priesthood as a continuation of the Levitical priesthood, for he says, "Of our father Jacob came the priests and Levites who serve the altar of God. From him comes Jesus Christ according to the flesh (ch 32:2). It seems fairly clear that Clement was one of the first bishops in Rome, so it follows as a consequence that the idea of a separate priesthood should have permeated the community there.

The N.T., though, does not substantiate this view; it says nothing of a sacerdotal class in contrast to a laity. As a matter of fact, Paul exhorts the brethren in Rome, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — which is your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1 N.I.V.). Furthermore, Peter, who is almost deified in some quarters as the first Pope, says, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5 N.I.V.); also, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belong to God" (v9). It seems to me that Peter knew nothing of a special class of priests in the Church, on the contrary, the priesthood, according to him, consisted of *all believers*; holy, so that they might offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God; royal, because they were entrusted with the dignity of showing forth to the world the Lord's excellencies. How can anyone teach in the Church a division of clergy and laity from statements like these?

Church Government

When we study the N.T. we should not be in any doubt as to what comprises Church government. We read that there were Elders in the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2); in Acts 14:23 we read that Paul and Barnabas appointed Elders in each Church in cities and towns of Asia Minor; in Acts 20:17 we read that Paul sent for the Elders of the Church in Ephesus; and Titus was left in Crete by Paul to straighten out what was left unfinished "and appoint Elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). Paul, in the preamble to his letter to the Philippians says, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (bishops, elders) and deacons" (Phil. 1:1).

The divine arrangement seen throughout the N.T. is for a plurality of Elders to be appointed in each Church. The word 'episcopos' indicates the function of overseer; the word 'presbuteros' indicates the spiritual maturity of such a person. The qualifications are given in 1 Tim. 3:17 and in Titus 1:6-9. Deacons are also an integral part of Church government and *their* qualifications are also set out in 1 Tim. 3.

Conclusion

I cannot say if there are any members of the Church of Christ who would secretly like to have the titles mentioned; all I can say is that I do not know of any, nor would I expect there to be any. The fundamental stance of the Church of Christ is in keeping with what is revealed in the N.T. and can be summarised as follows.

First, individual communities of Christians elect from among their number Elders and Deacons. Each community is autonomous under its elected leaders. We know nothing of any 'See' situation where one bishop presides over the leaders of a number of other communities.

Second, we believe that the verb 'to minister' applies to *all* christians. We can find nothing in the N.T. relating to community leadership and autonomy when the word 'minister' is used as a noun and preceded by the definite article. If it is thus used by any secular authority regarding the status of any of our leaders we would expect that they, the leaders, would disabuse other people's minds concerning this, even though it might involve financial loss, or denigrate 'supposed' status.

Finally, we accept that true commitment to Christ implies genuine vicarious responsibility of Christian to fellow-Christian; hence, we do not need the office of Vicar. — (All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 377 Billinge Road, Highfield, Wigan).