

William MacDonald:

GIFTS FOR TODAY

It was mentioned earlier that originally there were five gifts-apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. It was suggested that the first two were concerned primarily with the foundation of the Church, and that, in general, the need for them passed when the complete Word of God was given in written form.

That means that we have three gifts today-evangelists, pastors, and teachers. However, the probability is that the "pastor-teacher" gift is just one gift, in which case only two of the gifts would be operative today. We turn now to the purpose of the gifts and how they function.

WHY GIFTS ARE GIVEN

The purpose of the gifts is set forth in Ephesians 4:12, 13. "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Now upon first reading this verse in our King James Version of the Bible, one would think that these are three separate reasons why the gifts were given: namely (1) for the perfecting of the saints, (2) for the work of the ministry, (3) for the edifying of the body of Christ. However, is this what the passage teaches? A study of other versions reveals that it is not.

The Revised Version, for instance, indicates that in the second and third instances of the use of the word "for" the word is better translated "unto." The verse then reads, "For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering unto the building up of the body of Christ." This then reveals not three reasons why the gifts were given, but rather one reason alone-to build up the saints in the faith, so that they in turn can do the work of ministering (or serving), so that the body of Christ will be built up numerically and spiritually. It is the saints who are to do the work of ministering.

THE TRUTH ILLUSTRATED

We might illustrate this truth by a diagram (Figure 1). The circle in the center depicts, let us say, the gift of a teacher. He ministers to those in the circle around him, so that they become perfected (that is, built up in the faith), and they then go forth to minister to others. In this way the church grows and expands. It is the divine method of reaching the greatest number of people in the shortest possible time.

According to this divine pattern, the evangelists and pastors and teachers always have in view the idea of reaching, training, and equipping others to do the work of ministering.

Although not every Christian has the gift of an evangelist, a pastor, or a teacher, yet every one is expected to engage in Christian service. Every member of the Church should be a worshipper, a soul winner, a Bible student, a propagator of the faith.

This important obligation is further stressed in 2 Timothy 2:2. "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

Once again this can be illustrated by a diagram (Figure 2).

Now this plan produces benefits that are apparent at once. It results in a rapid expansion of the Christian faith. Individual Christians become mature through exercising their God-given functions. By thus becoming mature, they are less susceptible to the teachings of the false cults so current in the world today. And the Church thus expanding and maturing gives a more accurate representation of the body of Christ upon earth.

THE SYSTEM COMMON TO CHRISTENDOM

Contrast with this, the system which is so common in Christendom today. One man is selected as minister of a

church. He preaches the sermons, baptizes the converts, conducts the communion service, and otherwise generally performs most of the religious duties of the congregation. The people listen to the sermons faithfully week after week, but in an unfortunately large number of cases, would be quite unwilling to assume any active participation, reasoning that they are paying someone else to do this for them. Too often they become, in short, sermon-tasters, with little real personal acquaintance with the truths of God's Word. And the ever-present danger is that these people, reared in an evangelical environment, remain mere "children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive" (Ephesians 4:14).

The present system we are speaking about may be illustrated in Figure 3.

Here the minister has his congregation and they dutifully attend the services; but having done so, they go back to their occupations, with little or no personal responsibility to do anything about what they have heard. Obviously what one minister can do in such a situation is very limited. On the other hand, if all or most of those people were active for the Lord, the progress would be remarkable.

It was such considerations that caused Alexander Maclaren to write: "I cannot but believe that the present practice of confining the public teaching of the church to an official class has done harm. Why should one man be for ever speaking, and hundreds of people who are able to teach, sitting dumb to listen or pretend to listen to him? I hate forcible revolution, and do not believe that any institutions, either political or ecclesiastical, which need violence to sweep them away, are ready to be removed; but I believe that if the level of spiritual life were raised among us, new forms would naturally be evolved, in which there should be a more adequate recognition of the great principle on which the democracy of Christianity is founded: namely, "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh-and on My servants and on My handmaidens I will pour out in these days of My Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

THE CLERICAL SYSTEM EXAMINED

This discussion of one-man ministry brings to the front the questions, "What about the clerical system? Is it scriptural? We shall now seek an answer to these pertinent queries.

By the clergy we mean a separate class of men humanly ordained to the service of God, and, in addition to preaching and teaching, usually given sole authority to perform the rites and ordinances of the church.

At the outset we would gladly recognize that many men who have held the clerical position have been outstanding servants of Christ and have been wonderfully used of Him. To many of them and their ministry, both oral and written, we owe a profound debt of gratitude which we gladly acknowledge. All such believers in the Lord Jesus, we readily embrace as our brethren.

But we must face honestly and squarely the fact that the idea of a clergyman is not found in the New Testament. Nowhere does one find one man in charge of a church. (At the end of the epistle to Titus, the subscription says, "It was written to Titus, ordained the first bishop of the church of the Cretians, from Nicopolis of Macedonia." However, no one contends that this footnote was part of the original text. It was added by the translators, who, of course, were biased in favor of clericalism. The Revised Version omits the note altogether.)

WHAT DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT SAY?

Not only is the idea of the clergy unsupported by the New Testament, but, we believe, it is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament.

First of all, it violates the principle of the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9). In the Old Testament, there was a separate caste of men standing between God and the people. In Christianity, all believers are priests, with all the privileges and responsibilities that go with priesthood. In practice, the idea of a one-man ministry effectively silences the worship and hinders the service of Christian priests.

Secondly, the clerical system often prohibits the free exercise of gifts in the church (1 Corinthians 12 and 14), by arbitrarily limiting ministry to one person or an official group of persons.

Again, it often confines the administration of the ordinances to a priestly caste, whereas Scripture makes no

such distinction.

The principle of salaried ministry, which almost invariably accompanies the clerical system, inevitably involves responsibility to some higher person or persons. This higher authority may exert pressure on a minister by imposing artificial and unspiritual standards of attainment. For instance, it is common to judge a man's effectiveness by the number of persons added to the church roll during the year. Not only is this not a true measure of effective ministry, but it creates the strong temptation to lower the standards of reception in order to make a better showing. The servant of Christ should not thus be bound, fettered, and hampered. He should ever be the Lord's free man (Galatians 1:10).

Clerisy caters to the ever present danger of gathering people to a man instead of to the Name of the Lord. If a man is the attracting power in a local church, then the attraction is gone when the man leaves. If on the other hand the saints gather because the Lord is there, then they will be faithful because of Him.

In practice, if not in theory, the clergy has served to obscure effectively the truth of the headship of Christ (Ephesians 1:72), and in some cases to deny it completely.

If it be contended that the bishops of the New Testament are the same as the clergy of today, we would reply that the New Testament contemplates several bishops in one church (Philippians 1:1), and not one bishop presiding over a church or a group of churches.

It is undeniable that many men in the clerical position are gifted servants of Christ to the Church. However, they did not become gifts by human appointment or ordination but by the work of the Lord Jesus Himself. They are responsible to so minister that the saints will be built up for active service, and not so that the saints will become perpetually dependent on them.

The evils that have flowed from human ordination of men who were not called of God are manifest and need no elaboration here.

Finally where one man is primarily responsible for the teaching ministry of the church, there is no system of checks and balances, and thus there is a danger of one-sided interpretations, if not of evil doctrine itself. Where the Holy Spirit, on the other hand, has liberty to speak through various gifts in the church, more facets of the truth are brought to light, and there is greater immunity from error where all the saints are assiduously comparing Scripture with Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Thus, though much blessing has often flowed from the ministry of men representing the clerical system, we believe that it is not only not God's best but that it is seriously detrimental to the best interests of the Church.

God's way is for the gifts to minister to the saints, then for the saints in turn to go forth to do the work of the ministry. The local assembly should recognize this important principle, and do nothing to hinder its free development. As the saints thus minister, unbelievers will be saved, saints will be edified, and new assemblies will be brought into being.