

The Role of the Church, and the place that her office-bearers should have in our thinking

by Rev. T. Aicken

I am troubled about an idea which has become very popular in our day – an idea which is now regarded as a Christian principle in pro-family circles, has spilled over into many churches and appears to be taking over there as well – and this idea, to state it succinctly, is that the family is the primary unit of society. What is meant by this is that the family is the real strength of community life, the foundation of all that is good, and that anything of any true and lasting value thus depends on the well-being of the home, without which civilization itself will disintegrate and soon be lost. But where, according to this view, is the church? How does it fit in? Well, the church does have its own function, it seems, but it is in the last analysis merely an extension of the home, something that directs the family and tries to keep it in good working order. I beg to differ with that view.

Much of the Church is sadly going astray in our day, and this, I believe, is one of the many (and one of the more subtle) ways it is doing so, thinking that the family is the ‘be-all and end-all’ of everything. As important as the family is, it is not that. To put this in biblical perspective, we have to begin with two fundamental questions. First, ‘What is it, above everything else, that God is doing in the world?’ Through the cross of Jesus Christ, He is reconciling sinners to Himself, calling them out of darkness into His marvellous light, from the domain of Satan to the kingdom of His dear Son. Is that not the chief thing that God Himself is doing in the world? As the Parable of the Tares makes clear, the Lord extends His common grace to all men in order to extend His redeeming grace to His elect, i.e. to seek and save and preserve them, each and every one, to the end.

Second, ‘What is the chief instrument that God is using for this task, for doing kingdom work in the world and calling sinners to Himself?’ The answer, surely, is not the family, but the Church, the visible Church represented by countless assemblies of God’s people all around the world. As the Westminster Confession of Faith states, “Unto this catholic visible Church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world.” If this is indeed the case, it must set local churches front and centre stage in our thinking of what God Himself is doing in the world, that He gives His sons and heirs priority over our own, and that His house, then, not ours, is the primary unit of society.

How we need to think about that! As “the pillar and ground of the truth,” as it is called in 1 Timothy 3:15, is it not the church which is the real strength of our communities and the foundation of all that is good? So much depends, including the continuing well-being of the family, on the spiritual vitality of the church! This is where truth is proclaimed. This is where truth is defended and maintained. And this is where men learn to live it out in the world. The church, in holding forth the word of life, is a voice for the family; the family is not a voice for the church. It is true that, if the family disappears, society will suffer great loss, but that is one of many reasons that a faithful and vocal church is so important – it exists to prevent that from happening! Have you ever considered how it would be if the church should disappear? The Lord has told us, Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision (i.e. where the ministry of the church is lacking, where there is no preaching of God’s Word and standing for truth), the people perish.” “I write,” says the apostle, “so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Are not these the foundations (the pillar and ground of the truth) which, if they be destroyed, says the psalmist, then even the righteous are left groping in the dark and wondering what to do?

I want to emphasize that the church is not an extension of the home, as too many people have come to believe. If anything, the home, rather, is an extension (or arm) of the church, and a place where some, only some, of the church’s ministry can be carried out most effectively. In 1 Timothy 3:5, Paul makes an important point, arguing from the lesser to the greater, that a weak husband and father ought not to be elected as an elder, for if any man does not know how to rule his own house (the lesser), how will he take care of the church, or household, of God (the greater)? This is not to deny the principle of “sphere sovereignty.” As R.B Kuiper put it so well in his book, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, the church must not lord it over families, insisting either that they do, or not do, what is in itself indifferent to Holy Scripture. On the other hand, and this is equally important, the church is responsible to counsel families according to the Word of God, and must not back down from doing so, even if

families tell the church defiantly to refrain from meddling with any of their affairs.

Well, you can see, brothers, that how we view our role as office-bearers is determined, to a very great degree, on how we view the role of the church itself. If, for instance, we regard the church as something relatively insignificant, then we are bound to regard our own work as elders and deacons in that same way, as something rather unimportant. If, on the other hand, we see the church to be what Christ Himself is building in the world, as He said – that this is the chief instrument He uses to extend and enhance His kingdom – then, suddenly, the value that we place upon what we do, as office-bearers of the church, is going to sky-rocket as well. And is this not a serious problem that we face today, that, with too small a view of the church and its role in society, fewer men are now willing than ever before to take up the duties and to accept the mantle of church office? The thinking seems to be, “With my life as busy as it is, with all the pressing demands that I face at home and at work, why should I give my time and energy and other precious resources (all in limited supply) to something that has only second or third rate importance anyway?”

In sharp contrast to that, the apostle Paul had a very low view of himself – he gloried not in his strengths, you remember, but in his infirmities (knowing that only when he was weak in himself was he strong in the Lord) – yet he had a very high view of his office and work, so high a view, in fact, that he stated it in the form of a question: “Who is sufficient for these things?” He knew, as we should as well, that there can be only one answer to that question, namely, “Our sufficiency is of God.” We know what the work and mission of the church is, do we not? We are to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. What an awesome and (if we had to do it ourselves) terrifying task! Ah, but here is the power of the church and the secret of her success laid bare: Our sufficiency is of God!

One may plant, in other words, another may water, but it is God who gives the increase. This does not reduce the value of such planting and watering. Indeed, it increases the value of these activities, because it is precisely by such means, by planting and watering (not normally without them), that God does give the increase. Our sufficiency is of God. Do you see how vital this is to our calling as elders and deacons, and how helpful it is to know it? We do not need to fear the work that the Lord has given us to do. We do not need to be overwhelmed by its magnitude, or by our own inability to accomplish it. Of course it is well beyond anything that we might do in ourselves! The point is, however, that God’s work, done God’s way – as we wait upon the Lord Himself, looking to His almighty power, not to our own feeble efforts – brings God’s blessing. We cannot determine beforehand, mind you, what exactly that blessing is going to look like, can we? It may be very different from anything we could have imagined. But God does use the means that He has appointed, and the people whom He has ordained to holy office, to achieve His own ends and sovereign purpose. What things are impossible to men are not impossible to God, and we will know, when the windows of heaven are opened up, that the blessing poured out (whatever it is) has come from Him! Our sufficiency is of God.

But let us move on now to the practical application of all this. I will give it to you under three points: the Great Need, the Great Danger, and the Great Challenge.

First, the Great Need

Clearly, if the church is to do its work in our day, a new generation of office-bearers will have to be raised up to give, with God’s gracious help, faithful and effective leadership. Where will such men be found? They will have to be, most of them, men who grew up within the ranks of the church. They will have to be men who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, men who are wholly committed to Christ and His Word, and are eaten up with zeal for His house. It may be argued that the Lord will always supply such men, but I suggest to you that He will not supply them – not in the numbers that we need them, at least –if we continue, as is too often done today, to promote a low view of the church in society, and with that a low view of office-bearers and their work. Paul had a low view of himself, remember, but he had a very high view of his office and work, and it is this perspective that we need to restore in our day in order to attract good men once again to holy office.

How often we see this, in small and large congregations alike, that it is a struggle to find enough of the right men to elect to office. I realize that this is not a problem which is going to disappear overnight – it may take ten or twenty years – but we have to begin talking to our young men right now, and very positively, about the role of the church, about the important duties of elders and deacons, and about how these are offices that the Lord Himself has created for the gathering and up-building of His people on their way to glory. In turn, we have to

stop telling them that the family is the primary unit, that this is where all the action is and the only place to serve God effectively. We need to get our young men reading about the calling of Moses, of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Let us direct them to the testimony of John the Baptist, of Peter and Paul, that they might learn for themselves what an honour it is, and what a unique blessing, to serve the Lord according to the ecclesiastical gifts and calling which are appointed and supplied by Christ!

Second, the Great Danger

There is a great need in our day to get more of the right men into office, but there is also a great danger if we do not go about it in the right way. James tells us, “My brethren, be not many masters (teachers), knowing that we shall receive the greater (stricter) judgment.” The focus here is really two-fold. On the one hand, let not all young men think, by virtue of their being in the church, that this entitles them to enter into office. There are, after all, qualifications for office listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, as well as calling and gifts which need to be considered. On the other hand, James is surely speaking to the elders of the church as well, and is telling them not to encourage too many of the men around them to become elders like themselves, as if this is the only worthy vocation to pursue, or, worse yet, to push some of them into this role in spite of their lacking the necessary gifts.

Yes, we want the men of the church to respect those who are in office, and to consider whether they should take up those same duties themselves – and we want our young men, especially, to look forward to that, to envision a day when they may so serve the Lord if that door should be opened up to them – but we are not looking for the wrong men. This is a useful word of warning in regard to all the offices (pastor, elder and deacon), and there can be little doubt that much of the trouble that so many consistories face in churches today is as a result of men in their number who are unqualified, and altogether ill-suited, to serve in the office to which they have been elected.

Third, the Great Challenge

Having noted the great danger, let me put before you, finally, the great challenge. Paul writes, “This is a true (faithful) saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop (elder), he desireth a good work.” (It should be noted that the terms ‘bishop’ and ‘elder’ are used interchangeably in the New Testament, as we see for instance in Acts 20.) What we find here is that it is a good thing to seek holy office, in other words, and that no man should be ashamed of so desiring to serve the Lord. Let every man search his own heart, therefore, including the male teenager if he is a Christian, and if he has any yearning (or even trace desire) to serve the Lord in this way, let him begin to prepare himself, right now, for that office he hopes one day to secure. Let him study the qualifications for that office, seeking to bring his own life in line with them. Let him exercise the gifts that are needed for that office, in whatever informal capacity that he can. It may be to chair a young people’s meeting, or to teach a Sunday School class, or to give a word of exhortation at a local nursing home. Let him do that so that he (and others in the congregation) may be able to assess whether he really has the necessary gifts. If he can demonstrate that he has and can profitably exercise such gifts, it will be evidence to the whole congregation, at least a few years down the line, that they have someone in their midst who is at last ready, and also eager, to serve in this way. This is a better approach, I submit, than falling into the danger I mentioned earlier, of having to pick from a list of either largely unwilling or potentially unsuitable candidates.

What, biblically, is the role of the Church? It is Christ’s Church, remember, the chief instrument the Holy Spirit uses for doing kingdom work in the world. In light of that, consider the place that she and her office-bearers should have in our thinking.