



God's calling: The office of the Christian believer

The forgotten office

This subject has gotten a great deal of attention in recent years. A growing number of books have been written about it — some of them with arresting titles such as, *Enemy in the Pew*; *God's Frozen People*; *Pete, You're God's Man*. Most of them seem to reveal a deep concern about the weaknesses and confusion of the churches in our time and suggest that if somehow the ordinary church members or "laymen" can be more widely and deeply involved in the churches' life and activities, this may be the road to church renewal. It is a curious fact that this subject, the focus of so much current attention, has been remarkably neglected throughout much of the churches' history. Hendrik Kraemer, one of the more orthodox (Barthian) leaders of the World Council of Churches, observed in his 1958 *A Theology of the Laity* (p. 10), that a systematic study of "*the laity's place and meaning, as inherent in the nature and calling of the church, has not so far been undertaken*" at least among non-Roman Catholics, and his little book was intended as a first such study. (He entitled his Dutch version of this material, *Het vergeten ambt in de kerk*, or "The Forgotten Office in the Church"). Later, in 1963 The World Council's study, *The Layman in Christian History* is prefaced with the rare claim that it is "*a genuinely original book*" in which "*unmistakably new ground has been broken!*" On the basis of the research of many collaborating scholars, the writers state that they "*have gathered together a vast amount of information such as has never before been brought within the covers of a single book.*" It may seem almost unbelievable that in nearly 2000 years of the churches' history a matter as elementary as the proper role of the ordinary church member had never been given a systematic and thorough study. Yet these specialists conclude that, although there have been limited surveys of areas and periods, "*church history has been written almost exclusively in terms of prelates, councils, movements and heresies,*" so that the role of the ordinary church member has been grossly neglected.

I became especially intrigued with the strategic role of the ordinary believer almost four decades ago when involved with a mission in mainland China. Later, the growing confusion about the proper order and functioning of the churches and the current questions and controversies about our Christian responsibilities in our society and world made it steadily more evident that we must give more attention than we have to the role that God's Word assigns to the ordinary believer.

What have others done to help us study this subject? As has already been observed, there is surprisingly little. My own interest in the subject arose long before the comparatively recent flood of writing about it. As Kraemer observed, much of that volume of writing has been "*practical,*" concerned with getting more action in the church, rather than founded on Christian doctrine, let alone the Bible. It is remarkable that most of this material has come from Roman Catholic, Liberal Protestant, or, at best, Barthian sources, and the resulting work, though sometimes useful, has been generally disappointing. In 1927 the Lutheran commentator, R.C.H. Lenski wrote a good little book, *Kings and Priests*, though its range of interests is somewhat limited. From a Reformed perspective, Harry G. Goodykoontz's (1963) *The Minister in the Reformed Tradition* has value, but its focus is not on the layman. When I looked for material on this subject years ago the only suggestion I could get was K. Sietsema's (pre-World War II) *Ambtsgedachte*, which has been translated by Dr. Henry Vander Goot and published this year by Paideia Press as *The Idea of Office*. This is a valuable book, stressing the fact that office involves God's appointment and authorization, not merely human ability, ambition and function. It too, however, is focused primarily on the church and that from a pastor's perspective. Abraham Kuyper concluded the third and last

volume of his Encyclopedia with the observation that the office of the believer was a subject that should get some special attention but he did not in this massive survey of Christian doctrine supply it! This was still "the forgotten office."

It would be incorrect to say that the office of believers has been totally forgotten in the churches' history. We need only to recall the Heidelberg Catechism's 12th Lord's Day, 32nd question and answer:

"But why are you called a Christian?"

"Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for all eternity."

The catechism's statement is a good summary of a great deal of Biblical teaching about this important subject. We, however, need to give that Biblical teaching a great deal more attention than we usually do. To suggest that is the purpose of this writing.

What is a Christian believer?

If we are to see clearly the Bible's teaching about the office of the Christian believer, we first need to consider what is meant by a "Christian believer." Both the growing religious confusion of our time and a look at some of the many books about the office of the believer or "layman" show that we need to do that. A little 1960 book by Karl H. Hertz, *Every Man a Priest*, nicely illustrates that need. In a promising arrangement of material, an introductory chapter on "What it Means to be a Christian" is followed by three on the Christian as priest, as king and as prophet. The Christian is characterized as open to radical change as we are "*victims of the tides of human history*," which currently seem to run against the Gospel. The writer suggests grasping the doctrine of "*the universal priesthood*" as a possible "*Christian answer to the confusions and contradictions of our time*." The Christian is then identified as "God's man, his handiwork through the redemptive deed of Christ." By an "*encounter*" he is, a "*picked representative of the new humanity*," "*restored to the image of God himself*," to be like Christ, a priest, king and prophet. The book's development of these three roles to show the Christian living as "*the new humanity*" obscures the difference between Christian and non-Christian, and stresses social action such as working for inexpensive open housing and removal of race discrimination. "*The heart of the Christian priesthood is just this intercessory action on behalf of others.*" "*The universal priesthood is universal. It includes all men in all the activities of life*" (p. 24), so that even non-Christians, when they engage in this social action, are also "*priests*" (p. 19). In fact, the book repeatedly finds non-Christians seeking its "progressive" (priestly, kingly and prophetic) social objectives, while Christians and churches do not. Thus the believer's office, proposed in this and similar books as a remedy for the current secular confusion and demoralization of the church and society, is interpreted to wipe out the difference between believer and unbeliever and really make worse the confusion that it was supposed to remedy. A look at this book and the prevailing ideas it expresses underscores the fact that if we are to talk about the office of the believer in today's confusion, we have to begin by defining and distinguishing what it means to be a Christian believer.

The Bible's definition of a believer

Let's turn to a passage in which the Apostle Paul anticipates and describes the kind of confusion that characterizes the church and society of our times, the third chapter of his second letter to Timothy:

"There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God."

(2 Timothy 3:1-4)

Do you know of a better description of the demoralization and violence that are tearing apart our communities and civilizations? The accompanying religion is described as *"having a form of godliness but denying its power"* (v. 5).

The remedy prescribed for this condition is the Christian faith. That "faith" does not mean only some vague experience. It is defined as believing *"the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."* We can and must trust those writings because *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work"* (vv. 15-17). This definition by the Divinely inspired Scriptures is exactly what is lacking in the popular slogans which urge laymen to work at saving dying churches. Because the definition by God's word has been discarded, the action being promoted, despite its religious trimmings, often turns out to be, no Christianity at all, but only a weak copy of the secular ideals of the unbelieving world that are destroying those churches. These "progressive" programs of the main-line churches are still disturbingly like that of the missionary we once heard preaching in 1948 in Peking, China. His sermon did nothing but glorify the progressive ideals of the Communists and deplore the backwardness of the churches in failing to support their revolutionary social program.

While, just as in Paul's day, *"evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived"* (v. 13) believers, like Timothy, are urged to *"continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."*

These Scriptures, however necessary and important, are not ends in themselves, but they are God's sure way to lead us to realize our sin and need of a savior and to turn to Jesus Christ as that only Savior. The Lord had to state that plainly to the learned theologians he encountered (John 5:39, 40),

"You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

Our use of the Scriptures does not stop when they have led us to come to Christ. They continue to be our complete guide to the life of faith in Him, *"teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* Both James (1:18) and the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:23) wrote of the believer being *"born again ... through the word of God."* In connection with that we notice the currently popular claim of many to be *"born again Christians."* But the Scriptures aim at much more than only bringing people to rebirth. They are also designed to nourish and guide them in growing from birth to maturity and to equip them for adult Christian service — *"so that the man of God may be equipped for every good work"* (cf. 1 Peter 2:2-5). If we are ever to begin to fulfill the calling and office of Christian believers we will have to be the kind of believers who are born and nourished by the Word of God.

The only reformations that have brought real renewal to the churches and societies in any time have been those that like King Josiah's, Augustine's, Luther's and Calvin's, De Kock's, Kuyper's, and Machen's received their motivations and direction from God's Word. In the further attention we hope to give to the office of the believer, let that be our starting point and guide. Further articles are intended to deal with the office of the Christian believer, its role in the church, in missions and in our duties in the world.

The Bible's teaching about the believer's office

Our Lord taught us that when we face important questions about which there are confused opinions we need to go back to the beginnings and see what God's Word says about His creative purpose. That is the way He treated the knotty questions about divorce in Matthew 19. He cut His way through the theologians' rationalizations of divorce (when they wanted one) by asking,

"Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female, and said, For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two

will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate."

God's creative purpose

In considering the role the Lord intended for the ordinary believer, about which there is also so much confusion, we ought to begin at the same point, the expressed purpose of the Creator. *"God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over...'"* the other creatures. This principle that man is created *"in the image of God,"* long assumed as a basis for Western civilization's respect for human life is now being denied. The result is that despite continued talk of "human rights," (our government defends the "right" to murder over 15 million unborn, and) all real appreciation of the Creator's purpose with the individual's life has virtually disappeared. The Word of God reminds us of that Creator's design, to restore a sense of our meaning and purpose in God's world.

Man "in God's image"

What does this "image of God" really mean and what is His purpose for it? The Bible quickly goes on to tell us of mankind's fall away from God – so evident through later history and especially today. Then it traces the history of God's promises and their fulfillment in the sending of Christ our Savior, to bring us back to God. In detailing the results of this reconciliation to God the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians, *"Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator"* (Colossians 3:9, 10). In the similar letter to the Ephesian Christians, Paul wrote that these believers were taught *"to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"* (Ephesians 4:23, 24). In other words, the Apostle teaches us that through the saving work of Christ the *"image of God,"* defaced and lost through man's fall into revolt against God, is being restored. That "image" is to be thought of, not as a visual image, but as consisting in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. That is, each individual Christian is being restored and called to know God, to serve God, and to love God. That is his and her high "calling" or "vocation" and "office."

The image after the fall

At this point the question might be raised whether, since the "image of God" is being restored in the Christian, this means that the non-Christian is no longer the "image of God." Some Christian theologians have concluded that they are not, but the Bible seems to indicate that matters are not quite that simple. After God judged and destroyed man and his world by flood, He established capital punishment for murder to protect human life saying (Genesis 9:6),

"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."

Despite the fall into sin, it is evident that mankind is still to be respected as, in some sense, the "image of God." The same point is evident in the letter of James (3:9). There we are warned not only against killing, but even against cursing our fellow men *"who have been made in God's likeness."* Each man and woman with his and her unique capacities as a human being is to be respected as the image of God, but the trouble is that each one of these unique human capacities is being misused and misdirected.

Mankind without God may make amazing discoveries and become very learned, but having lost the knowledge of God, lives *"as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity with a continual lust for more"* (Ephesians 4:17-19). Despite all of his learning, man is still in the dark, *"without hope and without God in the world"* (2:12). The same kind of perversion appears in the use of other human abilities, such as the ability to manage and rule. Has that management ability enabled us to live peacefully and safely in the

world? The ability to "love" and establish relationships continues, but consider how that too, is perverted and misdirected. Thus the Bible spotlights the pervasive and destructive results of sin in the present and the worse consequences in the judgments of the future.

"Anointed" for saving office

From this plight, Jesus Christ is promised and comes to save us. His official name or title is "*Christ*," meaning "*the anointed*." That word "anointed" calls attention to the ceremonial way men called and equipped by God in the Old Testament were officially placed in office. Exodus 30:22ff. details the prescription for a special oil or perfume. It was to be used for no other purpose than to symbolize that the people or things anointed with it were separated from all secular use and reserved for the special service for which God called and equipped them with the Holy Spirit. In this case especially the priests were ordered to be so set aside. They had to read God's law to the people to remind them of their obligations to Him and they had to offer the sacrifices which represented the way by which the people who had transgressed those laws might be forgiven and brought back to Him. In addition to the priests, the kings, called to govern and protect the Israelites as God's people, had to be ceremonially appointed to office by similar anointing. We also find the prophet, Elijah, who had to speak for God to the wayward people, ordered to anoint Elisha to succeed him in that role (1 Kings 19:16). That role of prophet is perhaps introduced most interestingly in Deuteronomy 18. The Israelites were warned that when they entered the land of Canaan they would find the people there resorting to all kinds of pagan fortune-tellers and spiritists in effort to find guidance. They were warned that God detested such practices and promised that they would be provided with real prophets like Moses who would speak for God in counseling and guiding them.

Christ, our Prophet, Priest and King

When Jesus comes He is announced as the "Christ," the Anointed, of whom all of these Old Testament officials were only limited anticipations. While they were only men like ourselves, He was uniquely God the Son, "*the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being*" (Hebrews. 1:3). Our Heidelberg Catechism (LD. 12, Q.31) nicely summarizes the Biblical teaching about Him.

"Why is He called 'Christ' meaning 'anointed'? Because he has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher who perfectly reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God for our deliverance; our only high priest who has set us free by the one sacrifice of his body and who continually pleads our cause with the Father; and our eternal king who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and who guards and keeps us in the freedom he has won for us."

On the basis of this official, saving work of Christ as our Prophet, Priest and King, the catechism, again following the Scriptures, immediately ties His role and office with that of each Christian believer. "*Why are you called a Christian? Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for all eternity.*" Thus each believer in Christ is being renewed in the image of God to again know, love and serve Him.

The Christian's similar office

Knowing Christ as his Prophet, each Christian is also called to be a prophet to "*confess Christ before men*." Our Lord, "*the light of the world*" (John 8:12), also tells His followers, "*You are the light of the world*" (Luke 5:14). At the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost the Apostle Peter had to explain, "*This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy'*" (Acts 2:16, 17). Each Christian is called to be God's prophet in this world. That does not mean to be a prophet in the popular sense of predicting the future, but in the broader, more basic sense of "speaking for God." Since Pentecost this is not the role of only a few exceptional people, but the "office" of each

believer. Each Christian, reconciled to God to live with Him as His child, is now called to serve Him as His priest. We become, as the Apostle Peter wrote, *"a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 2:5, 9). Similarly, the believer is saved to *"live and reign with Christ" as king, called to share in the labors, battles and triumphs of His kingdom. Christ "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father"* (Revelation. 1:6; cf. 5:10).

"You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

What we need to stress in all this is that these things are written not only about a few leaders or people in special positions, but about every Christian. This is what every believer in Christ is called to become. Whether you spend your days in a shop or office, school or house, or on a farm, whether you are a student, laborer or retiree, this is what Christ saves you to be. This is the too generally forgotten "office of the believer," our Lord's "calling" to become a prophet, priest, and king for and with Him.

God's "calling"

Georgia Harkness in her book *John Calvin, the Man and His Ethics*, following Max Weber, pointed out that in the Reformation, "calling" (Latin "vocation") began to be used *"in the sense of a life-task,"* stating that this was *"a new concept – the religious significance of one's daily task."* She observed further that Calvin went beyond Luther in saying that one must not serve God only in his vocation but also by his vocation (pp. 181, 182). Later she quoted Calvin's comments that *"Every individual's line of life, therefore, is as it were, a post assigned him by the Lord."* Consequently: *"there will be no occupation so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God"* (p. 211).

This double use of "calling" in the sense of the Lord's calling "to a godly life" and to an occupation is not really new. It is really a return to and application of what the Apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, *"Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called..."* The "calling" of the Lord to salvation through faith in Him becomes for every believer a call to His service as his daily business. We must be awakened to realize that the call of each believer to be the Lord's prophet, priest and king elevates him or her to such a position that it makes other differences in position or circumstances relatively unimportant. *"Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it, but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men."* Thus every Christian's role and work is recognized as God's "calling," and we are admonished,

"Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve."

(Colossians 3:23, 24)

Let us give this often overlooked "high calling" of each believer in Christ some further attention in coming articles, considering its place in the church, in Christian missions and in our duties in the world.

Christ's believers and church

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved..." was the gospel promise brought by the Lord's missionaries. If I believe in Christ and so am restored in the office of believer to know, love and serve God as His prophet, priest and king, what, if anything, does this have to do with a church? This understandable question becomes the more urgent as an apparently increasing number of people in our time are answering, "Nothing at all." A missionary en route to China, when asked to what church he belonged, once answered that since he was saved he had not joined any. He suggested further that, serving a big interdenominational mission, he might be a more useful missionary if he were not tied to the practices of any one denomination. Many people, disgusted

with the inconsistencies or bitter experiences they have encountered in some church, have decided that they can get along as well without joining any. After all, we can tune in on much more impressive radio and TV religious programs than we are likely to find in a local church. Why should one join any of them?

Although we might try to answer such questions by citing the benefits of joining a local church, we need to see that the only really decisive answers to them are those which the Lord Himself gave us. Since we are saved by believing in Him, we must be guided by what He said about the church. When Simon Peter made his famous confession of faith in Him (Matthew 16:16) He did not say that He would use this truth Peter confessed only to save people. He said, *"...upon this rock I will build my church ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven..."* (v. 18). This promise he repeated (in 18:18, 20) regarding those who come together in His name.

This point was exceptionally well stated by Harry Blamires in his book, *The Christian Mind* (p. 119).

"...Christians did not invent the Church: it is not something which they could either have had or not have had. We must not talk – and we must not allow critics of the Church to talk – as though the Apostles sat round a table in the early days and one of them said, 'I propose that we have a church,' and another said, 'I second that,' and it was carried ... For the Church was not manufactured to a human plan." "God made it, not man. He came to earth and left the Church behind him. Therefore, to talk of not seeing the need for the Church is like talking of not seeing the need for the moon. The Church, like the moon, is not a human project, but a divine creation." "God put it there. Speculators might argue that ... God might have thought up some different instrument of salvation, just as he might have devised a different means of lightening our darkness at night. But where does that kind of speculation get us? We are not concerned with what God did not do: we are concerned with what he did. And one of the things he did was to come to earth and establish the Church."

The Lord's purpose with this church is especially clearly explained by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 2 he describes how God made men who *"were dead in ... transgressions and sins"* and *"by nature objects of wrath," "alive together with Christ,"* and saved them *"through faith."* The process does not stop with that. As a result of this they *"are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household,"* built into *"a holy temple in the Lord ... to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit"* (vv.19-22). Christians are not left standing alone; as believers the Lord makes them

- 1) citizens of His kingdom,
- 2) members of His family, and
- 3) parts of His temple.

Accordingly, the Apostle Peter, to whom Jesus spoke about building His church, wrote in his First Letter (1 Peter 2:5) that men, coming to Christ, *"the living Stone ... 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."* In other words, the "calling" and "office of the believer" may not be understood as individual and independent of that of all other Christians, but it has a place in and function as part of Christ's Church. Each believer is part of a whole *"people of God," "family of God," "temple of God."*

Returning to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, we notice that in the 4th Chapter he urges believers *"to live a life worthy of the calling you have received"* and to *"make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace,"* considering that they form *"one body."*

Our oldest Reformed Creed, the Belgic Confession of Faith, simply reflects this teaching of the Bible when it states in its 28th Article, ***"EVERYONE IS BOUND TO JOIN HIMSELF TO THE TRUE CHURCH."***

"We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be,

ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it; maintaining the unity of the Church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them." "Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same or do not join themselves to it act contrary to the ordinance of God."

A key text

The Fourth Chapter of Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is a key text that, perhaps more clearly than any other, helps us to understand the Lord's designs for the way the office He has given to all believers is to be developed and to function in His church. *"To each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it" (v. 7).* In the church the ascended Christ (vv.11ff.) gave *"some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the full measure of perfection found in Christ".*

"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

Notice that in the development of the office and work of each believer, a special role and office is assigned to "pastors and teachers." Similar special assignments are given in each church to "elders" or "overseers" and "deacons" (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5-9). These "special offices" were given for the orderly, healthy development of the church and of each of its members toward fulfilling his or her "office" as a believer.

A history of confusion

Throughout the church's history much confusion and harm has resulted, and continues until the present, when the relationship between the "special offices" and the "office" of each believer has been misunderstood or overlooked. The special offices have been regarded and sometimes even studied without recognizing their main purpose to develop the more fundamental office, that of each believer. What resulted from this neglect was often a caricature of the Lord's revealed design for His church. Does this appear to be an overstatement? Let us quickly survey some of the developments in the church's history to see how it came about.

The Lord and His apostles from the beginning often warned His churches against the inroads of false teachings. Especially those in special offices must work to protect the church from them (Acts 20:28ff.) The early church father, Ignatius of Antioch, at about the end of the first century A.D., seeing the churches threatened by disunity and apostasy, wrote letters to several of them. He felt that a most effective way to protect the churches against these threats was to warn them to obey their bishops and to do nothing without the bishop's approval. He wrote the Smyrnaeans, *"You should all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father." "Nobody must do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop's approval ... Whatever he approves pleases God as well. In that way everything you do will be on the safe side and valid ... But he who acts without the bishop's knowledge is in the devil's service"* (8:1-9:1). Although we can appreciate the church father's undoubtedly excellent intentions, the direction of his counsel to suppress individual believers' exercise of office is unmistakable. When early in the church's history developments were taking this turn, it is not surprising that during the middle ages the church came to be commonly described as a ship operated by the clergy as crew, with the members merely going along for the ride (and paying the fare).

This state of affairs generally continued until the 16th Century Reformation. Then with Martin Luther there were indications of a change, as he was led by the grace of God to recover the Biblical gospel of salvation by faith in Christ, rather than clerical church ritual. As Luther sought to

bring the church back to Gospel teaching he encountered very little support among the church hierarchy, and was driven to seek support from other Christians who might be in a position to help in the needed reform. The first of his three great 1620 Reformation tracts, *An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian State*, appealed to them to take a hand in the reform of the church, pointing to their right to do so because all Christians are priests, as the Apostle Peter taught. It seemed that in this Reformation the office of the individual church member might begin to be properly recognized after it had been increasingly overlooked for centuries. The development of the reform movement speedily took a less favorable turn, however, when leaders of the peasantry, using the Reformation appeal to the Bible, began a Peasant Revolt that in 1625 threatened to become total anarchy. This kind of radicalism Luther strongly condemned. Calvin, as we have seen, stressed the calling and office of believers in society. While some of the more radical Anabaptist Reformers seemed to accept this principle, their inclination to appeal to the direct leading of the Spirit rather than to the Bible soon led many of them to develop an authoritarian attitude and endless divisions among their followers.

The apparent promise of the Reformation to develop a more adequate Biblical appreciation of the office of the individual believer in the church and its relation to the special offices has been largely unrealized. Instead, we see, right up to the present time, on one hand, a traditionalism that differs in this respect very little from that of Roman Catholicism. That is strikingly exemplified by a 1965 catechism book by J.M. Snapper and G.J. Spykman, issued by the Committee on Education of the Christian Reformed Church. This elementary book, entitled *Teach Me Thy Way* and intended to acquaint younger children with key Christian doctrines, introduced the Church in a chapter on "The King's Officers." It devoted over two pages, including four illustrations, to "the duties of the pastor," who was obviously the main officer, a short paragraph of less than 9 lines and an illustration to "the duties of the elders" who were his helpers, and a similar brief paragraph and illustration to the deacons. The whole discussion concluded with a few lines answering the question, *"What are my duties to the officers of the church?"* Since the officers are Jesus' "servants" who do His work and *"there is no more important work in all the world,"* our duty is said to be to *"Pray for them and show respect for them."* Even though the chapter concludes with a citation from Ephesians 4:11, 12a, it is ironic that the quotation ends with *"And he gave some to be ... pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints"*, with never a hint that the whole concern of the passage and the purposes of the special offices are to help each member to serve in the more inclusive office of the believer! This was still *"the forgotten office."*

Although that book appeared about 20 years ago, there is no indication that the fault that it exemplifies has really been corrected. In fact, as we see some indications of a growing "professionalism" in the training of ministers and a tendency to cast them in the role of the churches' "executives", the caricature may be getting worse. Mark Gibbs and T. Ralph Morton in their 1964 book, *God's Frozen People*, rather aptly described some of the mischievous results of this mistaken view of special office.

They quote HansRuedi Weber (in *Salty Christians*), *"Too often the clergy undertake to fulfil by themselves the ministry of the Church. And too often the laity delegate their ministry to the man, the clergyman. This 'one man show' is deeply unbiblical. Too many clergy and other Church workers fail to fulfil – or even to see – their main, specific function: the equipment of 'saints' for the ministry"* (p.17). Later they add, *"Without deliberate planning and certainly without any nefarious scheming on the part of the clergy, the congregation has developed a structure that depends entirely on the minister ... most people will say that it is only right ... that this is their job; for this they are trained. But ... this is what is crippling the life of the church ... the minister has changed from being the one ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament to being in addition the director of the work and activities of a congregation"* (p. 49). *"No factory no regiment — could survive if conducted on the system of the authoritative rule of one man. For a church which is a body of people called into the life and work of Jesus Christ it is disastrous"* (p. 52).

If, on one hand, the life and work of the church, and of the minister in particular, are being crippled by this unbiblical and exaggerated notion of what one man, instead of the Lord's whole congregation, is supposed to be doing, they are, on the other hand also being handicapped by a

growing reaction in an exactly opposite direction. Instead of seeing the life and work of the church mainly or only as those of special offices, many today are claiming that its life and work are only those of believers and that there is really no room for special - and certainly not authoritative - offices at all! That movement has drawn support from a 1972 C.R. Synod Report on Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination which tried to reduce special church offices to mere services and tried to eliminate from them any real authority. Despite a later synod's effort to correct that opposition to authority, the effect of this report has been to increase confusion about the roles of special offices and that of believers. Considering the present confusion about the proper responsibilities of special office in relation to those of each believer, we need hardly be surprised that some churches, including our own, are being driven to take extraordinary measures (even to the point of adding new denominational departments) to deal with the problems of a growing multitude of demoralized ministers.

The Biblical correction

The needed corrective for this spreading church demoralization is really neither complicated nor difficult. We need to return to the Bible in which the Lord revealed His design for the functioning of His church and its offices. (Problems in this area have arisen and continued to arise, exactly where or as the church, on whatever pretext — today the fad is to talk of the "time conditioned" character of the Bible and its proper interpretation — sees fit to ignore that guide. And real Reformation has always been by way of a return to that God-appointed Guide.)

Although, as we have been seeing, the Lord is restoring every believer in Him to office, the work of that office needs to be done, not independently, but in relation to the rest of His church (1 Corinthians 12:7ff., *"Now to each man the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good..."*). In that church each believer needs to profit by the work of the special offices the Lord has given for his and her development. The Letter to the Hebrews (13:17) enjoins us,

"Obey your leaders and submit to them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."

At this point we may observe that God's Word restricts eligibility for the special church offices to men (1 Corinthians 14:34-38; 1 Timothy 2:11-3:12; Titus 1:5ff.). We may not use what the Bible teaches about the office of each believer as an excuse to set aside what it cites as *"the Lord's command"* about special office (1 Corinthians 14:37), as many seem determined to do. Those who defy the Lord's order should not be surprised by the confusion and anarchy with which He sometimes rewards disobedience.

Although we are commanded to submit to church authority as representing Christ, this does not mean unconditional or unlimited submission to that authority. We must and may submit to it only as it is itself submissive to God's Word (Acts 17:11; Galatians 1:8; 1 John 4:1ff.).

The Apostle Peter, to whom the Lord had spoken about His establishing His church and about how He would build it through the official work of His representatives, instructed and warned the church elders (1 Peter. 5:1ff.)

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."

Notice the warning against three vices that have ruined official service throughout church history, laziness, greed and grabbing for power, and the proper corrective for each one of them! If those in special office serve in this eager and exemplary way and each member makes grateful use of that service, how can the church and its members fail to prosper?

In the November, 1956, issue of this publication, then called *Torch and Trumpet*, Rev. Martin Monsma, who was Professor of Practical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote a twelve-page article about "The Believer's Office and the Church." That article — which at some points

seems more up-to-date now than it was thirty years ago — although it is too long for extensive quotation here, lists some important rights and duties of believers within the church. It cites

- 1) their right and duty *"to organize themselves into autonomous local churches"*;
- 2) their right and duty *"to judge as to the Church's doctrinal position and as to its ecclesiastical practices,"* including the right to protest and appeal against injustices or errors of church officials or assemblies;
- 3) their *"right of reformation,"* including the *"right of secession"* when protests and appeals are disregarded by churches which are no longer faithful to the Bible or their confessions; and
- 4) *"the right and duty of church members to take an active part in the activities of their church."*

Much more was said and can be said about these matters, but this summary highlights church members' official responsibilities, which are commonly overlooked and at times are even being denied by churches' growing bureaucracies.

We need to notice, not only what members may and should do to correct what has gone wrong, but, more positively, how each believer must seek to profit by the church life and activity and the special services of its officials, and how each must engage in the service of Christ to which all are called. That service includes a missionary responsibility to bring the gospel to others, and a broader, related duty to serve Christ in the world.

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