

# Ordination and Religious Titles

Sword and Trowel Volume 4, 1874 pages 111-117

Charles H. Spurgeon

W hence comes the whole paraphernalia of ordination as observed among some Dissenters? Since there is no special gift to bestow, why in any case the laying on of empty hands? Since we cannot pretend that mystic succession so vaunted by Ritualists, why are men styled "regularly ordained ministers"? A man who has preached for years is Mr. Brown, but after his ordination or recognition he develops into the Reverend Mr. Brown; what important change has he undergone? This comes before us in the form of addresses upon letters "Reverend Titus Smith, Mr. Spurgeon's College," or sometimes, "Reverend Timothy Jones, Spurgeon's Tabernacle." Rather odd, this! Here are reverend students of an un-reverend preacher, the title being given to the one out of courtesy, and withheld from the other for the same reason. The Reverend Titus has met with a church which will insist upon an ordination, and he is ordained; but the President of his College, having never undergone such a process, nor even that imitation of it called a recognition, remains an un-ordained, unrecognized person to this day, and has not yet discovered the peculiar loss which he has sustained. We do not object to a recognition of the choice of the church by its neighbors and their ministers, on the contrary, we believe it to be a fraternal act, sanctioned by the very spirit of Christianity; but where it is supposed to be essential, is regarded as a ceremony, and is thought to be the crowning feature of the settlement, we demur.

"The Reverend Theophilus Robinson offered up the ordination prayer" has a Babylonish sound in our ears, and it is not much improved when it takes the form of "the recognition prayer." Is there, then, a ritual? Are we as much bound by an unwritten extempore liturgy as others by the Common Prayer.? Must there always be "usual questions"? And why "usual"? Is there some legendary rule for the address to the church and the address to the

pastor? Mark well, that we do not object to any one of these things, but we do question the propriety of stereotyping them, and speaking of the whole affair as if it were a matter to be gone about according to a certain pattern seen in the holy mount, or an order given forth in trust to the saints. We see germs of evil in the usual parlance, and therefore meet it with a Quo Warranto? Is not the divine call the real ordination to preach, and the call of the church the only ordination to the pastorate? The church is competent under the guidance of the Holy Spirit her own work, and if she calls in her sister churches, let her tell them what she has done, in such terms that they will never infer that they are called upon to complete the work. The ordination prayer should be prayed in the church meeting, and there and then the work should be done; for other churches to recognize the act is well and fitting, but not if it be viewed as needful to the completion of the act itself. We have noticed many signs of an error in this direction.

The small matter which we have mentioned leads on to another which is by no means small, namely, the notion in some churches that only an ordained or recognized minister should preside at the Lord's table. Small is our patience with this unmitigated Popery, and yet it is by no means uncommon. Pulpits which are most efficiently supplied on other Sundays by men who are without pastoral charge must be vacated by them on the first Sunday of the month because the friends like a stated minister to administer the sacrament. This may not always be the language employed, but it often is and it is an unsanctified jargon, revealing the influence of priestcraft. Whence comes it? By what scripture can it be justified? "Breaking bread from house to house" does not read very like it. We suppose that the idea of a deacon leading the communion would horrify a great many, but why? If the church should request a venerable brother to conduct the service, a brother of eminent grace and prayerfulness, would the ordinance be any the less instructive or consoling because he was not in the ministry? Naturally enough the pastor, when there is one, leads the way by the respectful consent of all; but would fellowship with Jesus be more difficult, if he were out of the way, and an elder or deacon occupied his place? Our experience

has never led us to bemoan, on the account of our people, that the communion was a maimed rite when a beloved deacon or elder has filled our chair. We love to have our brethren sitting with us at the table, breaking the bread as much as we do, and giving thanks aloud as we do, because we hope that by this visible sign men will see that "one is our Master, even Christ, and all we are brethren." Are we the less respected by our church officers for this? Do they take upon themselves lordly airs? Far from it. A more beloved and loving set of men never surrounded a pastor. We magnify our office in the best manner when we do not magnify it beyond the teaching of the Lord.

Who are we that our presence should render more valid, or more lawful, the remembrance of our Lord's death until he come? All things are to be done decently and in order, but that order does not necessitate a church's going without the Lord's Supper because there is no pastor or regular minister to be had. At least we fail to see any support for such an idea, except in the traditions of the fathers, and the sooner these are consigned to oblivion the better. We confess we do not admire the Plymouth fashion of passing round a lump of bread for all to peck at, like so many crows, or the plan of hawking a slice from hand to hand, for each one to break on his own account, for it is not a clean or decorous practice; and as it never would be tolerated at our own tables, it certainly ill becomes the table of the Lord: but even these odd ways are better, or at least less harmful, than the practice of a slated minister administering the elements, for "slated minister" is little more than "priest writ large" in the idea of weaker brethren; or if it be not so now, it soon may be so, and the sooner it is put an end to the better for posterity.

Even now we know of churches which have dispensed with the Lord's Supper week after week because the pastor was ill, there being, of course, no other brother in the whole community who had grace enough to preside at the table, or administer the sacrament, as some of the brotherhood call it.

When matters have gone so far, it is surely time to speak out against such worship of men.

By one of those whimsical freaks of superstition for which there is no accounting, the benediction is in some regions almost as sacredly reserved for the minister as the absolution for the priest in Popish churches. We heard it remarked the other day as quite a singular thing that a non-ministerial brother, being in the chair at a religious meeting, had actually pronounced the benediction. We had not noticed the man's audacity, but evidently others had. Here was a mere layman thinking himself as able to invoke a blessing upon the assembly as the clerics around him! The brethren around us expressed their pleasure that he had done so, but even this showed that it was rather an innovation, very commendable, no doubt, in these days, but still an innovation. "Will you close the meeting?" has often been whispered in a minister's ear when some excellent Christian man has been in prayer, who might just as well as not have finished his supplication with the blessing, and so have dismissed the assembly. But that must not be, only ministers must take those sacred words upon their polluted lips! Fiddle-de-dee is the only word which will enable us to vent our feelings.

But we forbear, and change the subject. It is very natural that our friends should desire their minister to baptize them, and yet there is no reason why he should do so on account of his office. It does not appear from the Scriptures to have been an act peculiar to preachers; in fact, at least one of them, and he by no means the least, was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel. A vigorous Christian member of the church is far more in his place in the baptismal waters than his ailing, consumptive, or rheumatic pastor. Any objection urged against this assertion is another unconscious leaning to tradition, if not a relic of superstition. The usefulness of the ordinance does not depend upon the baptizer, but upon the gracious meditation and earnest prayer of the person baptized: the good which he will receive will depend upon how far his whole soul is receptive of the divine influence, and in no sense, manner, or degree upon the agent of the

baptism. We do not know what Paedobaptists think upon their ceremony, but we fear that the most of them must have the minister to do it, and would hardly like their infants to be left to the operation of an un-ordained man. If it be so, we do not so very much wonder at their belief, for as it is clear that no good arises to an infant from its own prayers or meditations during the ceremony, there is a natural tendency to look for some official importance in the performer of the rite; but yet we do not and cannot believe that our Paedobaptist friends have fallen so low as that; we make no charge, and hope we shall never have cause to do so. For Baptists to attach the smallest importance to the ordinance of baptism being administered either by a minister or a private member Would be to the last degree inconsistent, and yet we are not sure that the inconsistency is not to be found in many quarters. It behooves ministers to break down in time every tendency to make us into necessary adjuncts of the ordinances, for this is one step towards making us priests.

Upon the same spirit as it crops up in reference to marriages and burials we need not remark. Neither of these things are in themselves our work, although, as they furnish us with excellent occasions for doing good, it is well for us to attend to them. At the same time here are two threads for the syrup of superstition to crystallize upon, and it will do so if not prevented.

The ignorant evidently attach some importance to reading or speaking over a corpse at a funeral, and do not regard the service as meant wholly for themselves, but as having some sort of relation to the departed. To have a gracious exhortation and prayer at home, and then lay the dear remains in the tomb in solemn silence, would be regarded as barbarity by many, and yet it would be no unseemly thing. To give the minister liberty to keep to the word of God and prayer, and release him from serving sepulchres, is according to apostolic precedent, and yet our churches would be grieved if it were carried out. When one of the Lord's disciples desired to postpone his evangelistic labors till he had buried his father, he was bidden to let the

dead bury their dead; but such advice followed out now-a-days would bring down heavy censure upon the minister. Is this as it should be? Our calling is to preach the gospel, and not to marry the living or bury the dead.

By what process have these things come to be an integral part of our ministry? Are they really the business of the ministers of Christ? It is not meet that we should needlessly grieve any by refusing to attend upon either of these occasions, but we must take heed that we do not feed the sickly sentimentalism which makes the preacher necessary to them. We must all have seen how soon a superstition springs up, and therefore we must be on our guard not to water the ill weed.

The duty of visiting the sick and dying is one which we do not wish to shirk, but may it not become another door for priestliness to enter? and, indeed, is it not so? The poor will hasten to our doors, and ask us to "come and pray to their sick friends:" yes, those are the very words "Please, sir, would you come and pray to my husband?" Often have we heard the expression, "The clergyman has been in and prayed a prayer to him, sir." To the London poor ministers both in church and dissent are alike parsons or clergymen, and city missionaries are almost as good, and in their distress they very frequently send for one or another of us out of sheer superstition; not because they would learn the way of salvation, but because "having a good man in to pray to them" is the right thing to do for dying people. The like, or perhaps a worse superstition, leads to a high estimate of a burial service. Rattled over as it frequently is by cemetery chaplains, who have "one on and two more awaiting," the burial service cannot be of any use to the living, and must surely be performed for the sake of the dead.

Nobody says so among Protestants, but the idea is in the air and may by degrees condense into a belief, unless we are expressly earnest to prevent it. We shall continue to mingle with the devout men who carry our Stephens to the sepulcher, and we shall not fail to weep with them that weep, but we will not allow the ignorant to imagine that we are there to perform some mystic rite.

These few remarks touch only upon ministers, and leave other matters for another equally brief chapter; but we cannot lay down the pen without asking why so many brethren still retain the title of Reverend? We are willing to reverence the aged pastor, and we did not hesitate to give that title to our beloved friend George Rogers, just in the same way as we use the term "the venerable Bede," or "the judicious Hooker," but we are not prepared to reverence every stripling who ascends the pulpit; and, moreover, if we thought it due to others to call them reverend, we should still want some reason for their calling themselves so. It seems rather odd to us that a man should print upon his visiting card the fact that he is a reverend person. Why does he not occasionally vary the term, and call himself estimable, amiable, talented, or beloved? Would this seem odd? Is there any valid objection to such a use of adjectives after the fashion is once set by employing the word reverend? If a man were to assume the title of reverend for the first time in history it would look ridiculous, if not presumptuous or profane. Why does not the Sunday-school teacher call himself "the Respectable John Jones," or the City Missionary dub himself "the Hardworking William Evans"? Why do we not, like members of secret orders and others, go in for Worthy Masterships and Past Grands, and the like?

I hope that we can reply that we do not care for such honors, and are content to leave them to men of the world, or to the use of those who think they can do some good thereby. It may be said that the title of reverend is only one of courtesy, but then so was the title of Rabbi among the Jews, yet the disciples were not to be called Rabbi. It is, at any rate, a suspicious circumstance that among mankind no class of persons should so commonly describe themselves by a pretentious title as the professed ministers of the lowly Jesus. Peter and Paul were right reverend men, but they would have been the last to have called themselves so. No sensible person does reverence us one jot the more because we assume the title. It certainly is in some cases a flagrant misnomer, and its main use seems to be the pestilent one of keeping up the unscriptural distinction of clergy and laity.

A lad fresh from college, who has just been placed in a pulpit, is the Reverend Smith, while his eminently godly grandfather, who has for fifty years walked with God, and is now ripe for heaven, has no such claim to reverence. A gentleman of ability, education, and eminent piety preaches in various places with much zeal and abundant success, but he is no reverend; while a man of meager gifts, whose principal success seems to lie in scattering the flock, wears the priestly prefix, having a name to be revered when he commands no esteem whatever. This may be a trifle, many no doubt so regard it; why, then, are they not prepared to abstain from it? The less the value of the epithet the less reason for continuing the use of it. It would be hard to say who has a right to it, for many use it who have not been pastors for years, and have not preached a sermon for many a day; what on earth are they to be revered for? Other men are always preaching, and yet no one calls them reverend, but why not? The distribution of this wonderful honor is not fairly arranged. We suggest that, as the wife is to see that she reverence her husband, every married man has a degree of claim to the title of Rev., and the sooner all benedicts exercise the privilege, the sooner will the present clerical use of it pass out of fashion. We wonder when men first sought out this invention, and from whose original mind did the original sin emanate. We suspect that he lived in the Roman Row of Vanity Fair, although the Reverend John Bunyan does not mention him. One thing is pretty certain, he did not flourish in the days of the Reverend Paul, or the Reverend Apollos, or the Reverend Cephas.