

## *The Use of Titles*

Now to grasp another nettle. Titles. The New Testament never uses any title for any man in the church. What is more, it categorically forbids it. Nowadays, however, most Christians do use titles – or one in particular – and do so without turning a hair, even though it contradicts Christ’s plain command. Complaining of the scribes and Pharisees who loved ‘to be greeted in the market-places and to have men call them “Rabbi”’, Christ said:

But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi’, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher’, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt. 23:1-12).

But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father... And do not be called teachers... But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted (NKJV).

I confess that I do not see how Christ could have expressed himself more clearly. No titles in the church of God. Full stop! I am not saying today’s believers generally use the actual title ‘Rabbi’, of course. It is the principle I am concerned with. And there is a principle here, make no mistake. No titles in the church.

In light of this, why do most church members use a title – as they do, for instance, when they address a man as ‘Pastor Bloggs’, ‘Pastor Fred’ or merely ‘Pastor’? I have noticed the rising trend in Reformed and evangelical circles to speak of ‘Pastor Tom’, aping the Church of England with its (to me, at least) nauseating and pseudo-friendly ‘Bishop Tom’. How often do we hear: ‘Would Pastor like a cup of tea?’ ‘Would Pastor give thanks?’ ‘Would Pastor sit here?’ ‘Pastor Bill said this or that’. I know from experience that a wife can refer to her husband as ‘Pastor’! Allowing the word for the moment – which we ought not, because, as I explained, the New Testament does not – why is it so very rare to find ‘a pastor’ addressed as other men? It seems as though most

## *The Use of Titles*

Christians think – to judge by the words they use – ‘a pastor’ is something other than an ordinary mortal. They give him a title, ‘pastor’. It is as simple as that.

Now to speak of a man as ‘Mr X, who is an elder of such and such a church’, is one thing, it is right; to call a man ‘Pastor X’ or ‘Elder X’, however, is very different. *It is to give a man a title.*<sup>1</sup> ‘Paul, the apostle’, is biblical; ‘the apostle Paul’ (contrary to the practice of the overwhelming majority of believers), is not. Although the apostles were never addressed with a title, Paul, for instance, is nearly always referred to as ‘the apostle Paul’ these days. In Scripture, however, he is called ‘Paul an apostle’, or ‘the apostle’, but never ‘the apostle Paul’. I have repeated this because I know to the overwhelming majority of Christians it will sound utterly incredible; ‘the apostle Paul’ is an unbiblical phrase. I am not nit-picking. The first Christians did not use titles.

I am not making it up. My words *have* been dismissed as ‘nit-picking’. Very well. Except I really do think that ‘Pastor Bill’ really has become a title which carries a massive status within the limited circles of the churches. I recognise that I am probably in a minority of one, or close to it,<sup>2</sup> but the fact remains – nit-picking or not – we never read that Paul described himself, or was described as, ‘the apostle Paul’. So, if nothing else, why do we not abandon a habit for which there is no biblical precedence whatsoever, and copy that which does have a biblical precedent?

I hear the cries of protest going up; I sense hackles rising. Talk about a typhoon in a thimble! Does it matter?<sup>3</sup> Well, allowing for the moment that there is such a man as ‘the pastor’, if we used this form of address for everybody else in the church it would not be so bad, perhaps: ‘Milkman Smith’, ‘Rodent-Officer Black’, ‘Housewife Johnson’, and so on. How about ‘Teacher Robinson’, ‘Deacon Brown’, ‘Helper Smith’, ‘Bishop Green’, or ‘Meeting-House-Toilet-Cleaner Jones’, or ‘One-Who-Clears-Up-The-Mess-Which-Is-Left-Over-After-Everybody-Else-Has-Vanished-Following-Yet-

---

<sup>1</sup> Peter was a saint, but I abhor the use of ‘Saint Peter’.

<sup>2</sup> Since writing this, I have come across Arthur W. Pink saying the same thing (Pink: “‘Doctor’ or ‘Brother’?”). That makes two of us!

<sup>3</sup> Reader, if you have any doubt, glance back at Clarkson’s words I quoted at the start of this book.

## *The Use of Titles*

Another-Church-Jamboree Smith'? But this is just what we do not do! We give a title to one sort of man and one sort only. Why? By giving titles to pastors – and nobody else – Christians effectively separate ministers from the rest of the church, and divide believers into two groups, reinforcing the notion of a clergy and laity. And all despite the fact that Christ forbids his people to use any titles in the church, and despite the fact that he does it plainly, even categorically.

Consider 2 Corinthians 8:23. 'Titus... is my partner and fellow-worker... As for our brothers, they are representatives [messengers, NKJV] of the churches and an honour to Christ'. So said Paul. Were Titus and these others ever addressed as 'Partner Titus', 'Fellow-Worker Titus', 'Representative Gaius', 'Messenger Quartus', 'Honour-To-Christ Onesimus', or whatever? I fully concur with the apostle's dictum: 'Such men deserve recognition' and 'honour' and 'respect' (1 Cor. 16:18; Phil. 2:29; 1 Thess. 5:12). But that does not mean that we give them titles, along the lines, of, say: 'Devoted-To-The-Service-Of-The-Saints Stephanas', 'Joiner-In-The-Work-Of-The-Gospel Fortunatus', or whatever, does it? How about: 'Labourer Achaicus', 'Riskier-Of-His-Life-For-Christ Epaphroditus'? See the context of the verses just quoted. Paul could not have put greater dignity upon such men – but he never resorted to the use of titles to do it. Why, giving them a title would have robbed them of the very honour he wished to bestow upon them. Rather like the old days when the rule in postage stamps was that the more banana the Republic, the more showy its stamps – the bigger the ecclesiastical title, the smaller the honour, I suggest.

I am doing this deliberately. It's utter nonsense, isn't it? Of course it is. So how about 'Pastor Bloggs'?

No doubt, many Christians will plead they only use 'Pastor' or 'Minister' or 'Reverend' as courtesy titles, and they mean no harm by it. I realise they will be offended by my strictures. I cannot help it. The practice is a cause of great mischief in the churches of God, since it is nothing less than disobedience to Christ, albeit unwitting in many cases. And disobedience to Scripture is sin, and it carries large consequences (Matt. 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49; Rom. 2:13; Jas. 1:22-25; 2:14-20; 1 John 3:4).

## *The Use of Titles*

So what of Christ's command? Amazingly, some otherwise excellent Reformed commentators argue black is white on this issue. They are quite prepared to say, in print, that Christ does not forbid calling 'ministers' 'masters and fathers'. With respect, this is precisely what Christ does forbid! It is staggering to read such words from Matthew Poole in a Reformed commentary.<sup>4</sup> One would expect to find them in a papistical book, but not in a Reformed work. Nor is it enough to argue that all Christ forbids is a *chasing after* ('hunting' was Poole's word) a title. Far from it! Christ forbids the *use* of titles. Calvin thought it 'absurd' not to give teaching ministers a title, as long as they do not exercise lordship over God's people. I agree, of course, teachers should not lord it over God's flock, but this is not what Christ is dealing with at this point. He is teaching the opposite of Calvin. Christ says it *is* absurd to entitle men in the church; worse, it is utterly wrong. Calvin, however, undeterred, ploughed on regardless.<sup>5</sup> It is readily agreed that *boasting and glorying* is forbidden in the church, yes, but that is not the point Christ was making. It is not the *boasting* about titles which Christ condemned, nor the *seeking* after them. It is their *use*.

Clearly Christ's commands concerning titles apply to the church, and only to the church. We need not worry about the use of titles in the world. This is perfectly acceptable for Christians in a civil sense. Paul used them on occasion, when addressing titled rulers like king Agrippa or Festus, for instance (Acts 26:2,7,13,19,25,27), giving them due honour, as he should (Matt. 22:21; Rom. 13:7; 1 Pet. 2:17). But, as Christ said, this sort of thing must never be brought *into the church*. Never! Hence, if a king or a president, say, becomes a member of a local church, within the life of that church he is but a man. He is not to be treated as, nor addressed as, a king or president – he has no status or title above any other member. When James VI was told precisely this by some preachers in Scotland, he didn't like it.

On this point, just because a man has a certain status in the world – in his profession, or whatever – it does not automatically qualify him to be an elder in the church. Nevertheless, in my experience, it was not unknown for a bank manager, say (in those

---

<sup>4</sup> Poole p108.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.17 Part 1 pp79-81.

## *The Use of Titles*

dim and distant days when we still had bank managers), to be automatically considered ‘elder material’ – simply because he was a bank manager. Something similar might be said of a university lecturer or a school teacher becoming a teacher in the church, simply because he is a success in the world of education.

I say it again, while it is perfectly right to use titles in the world, *in the church it is not so*. The love of titles is deeply ingrained within men, however – the Pharisees of old were smitten with it (Matt. 23:1-12) – and their use is almost universal today. Some ministers seem to love to be addressed as ‘Pastor’. What is more, many Christians seem to revel in it; they want titles in the church; they crave them.

Paul, it is true, described himself as a ‘father’ and ‘mother’ (1 Cor. 4:14-15; Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim. 1:2). *But he was not using a title*. He was stating a fact; he acted *like* a father and a mother (1 Thess. 2:7,11); he showed the qualities of a loving parent. But he was never addressed as ‘father’ or ‘mother’. Indeed, the very idea of the latter shows the ludicrous nature of the entire business. Can you imagine any Christian talking about ‘Mother Paul’? He was ‘a teacher’ (1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11), an apostle, but he was never entitled thus, he was never known as ‘Teacher Paul’, or, as I have noted, ‘Apostle Paul’. Nor was he ever called ‘Pastor Paul’, even though never did mere man have a more pastoral heart. Of course he did not use a title – seeing that Christ ruled it out in the church. Paul, therefore, refused to ‘seek glory from men’ (1 Thess. 2:6-11, NKJV). He who was determined to boast or glory in nothing except the cross (Gal. 6:14), would never have used titles – since this is a sure-fire way of seeking (and getting!) glory (and worse!) from men. Christ, it is clear, wants his people to shun the use of titles. The reason is obvious. The use of titles engenders a sinful sense of eminence and rank among his people.

So much for ‘Pastor’ and such like. As for ‘Reverend’, words utterly fail. It should only be applied to God. He is the one person who has the name of ‘Reverend’ – for ‘holy and awesome [reverend, AV] is his name’ (Ps. 111:9). It should never be used of men. Does this need to be said? Some believers, perhaps, accustomed to the AV, think Scripture justifies the practice. For instance, wives are commanded to reverence (AV) their husbands

## *The Use of Titles*

(Eph. 5:33). This translation is unfortunate, to put it no stronger. The word used here comes from *fear* or *deference*. I admit it is used in Scripture to speak of the veneration of God, but the context must qualify its use. No wife should greet her husband with the title ‘Reverend’, surely? Which wife did so in Scripture? The NIV (and NKJV) quite properly uses the word *respect*.<sup>6</sup> The wife is to *respect* her husband, not reverence him. She is to respect her husband, but reverence her God.

But what of the command to believing women to copy ‘Sarah [who] obeyed Abraham, calling him lord’ (1 Pet. 3:6, NKJV)? Did Sarah address Abraham as ‘*Lord*’? Was Peter not pointing out that Sarah habitually respected and obeyed her husband, and submitted to him as ‘lord’, ‘master’ (NIV)? I think the answer is self-evident. The Greek, *kurios*, can mean someone with ‘authority... the power of deciding’; it is a word ‘expressive of respect’.<sup>7</sup> Surely it means that here.

Another possible misdirection comes from the AV translation of Hebrews 12:9 – we give our earthly fathers *reverence*. The verb really means ‘to show deference to, to be submissive to, to respect’. See also the NKJV. But no child should ever address his father as ‘Reverend’, should he?<sup>8</sup> And if this much is self-evident, what possible justification can there be for believers to address ministers as ‘Reverend’? It is utterly obnoxious. Even if believers claim they are only showing respect, it is still wrong to use the title. A wife must *respect* her husband, yes; a son must *respect* his father, yes; a believer must respect his elders, yes (1 Cor. 16:18; Phil. 2:29; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7,17,24). Nevertheless, no father or husband – *and no elder* – should ever be saluted as ‘Reverend’. The idea is preposterous.

Furthermore, experience shows that the misuse of the word soon leads to the actual reverence of men in practice. And this in turn becomes a bulwark of the priestly system, so beloved of Papists.

---

<sup>6</sup> If titles *were* allowed, ‘Pastor Bloggs’, ‘Reverend Bloggs’ would have to be entitled ‘Respect Bloggs’.

<sup>7</sup> See Thayer.

<sup>8</sup> I acknowledge that a son used to call his father ‘Sir’. It comes from the Old French, *messire*, ‘mylord’, *sieur* (‘lord’), Latin *senior* (‘elder’). It has been used for ‘male parent’ since the 13th century.

## *The Use of Titles*

According to *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, ‘Reverend’ means ‘worthy of deep respect or reverence on account of rank, age or character’. Its application ‘to members of the clergy’ dates from 1485, and the attaching of the prefix ‘to the name and designation of the person’ dates from 1642. ‘Reverence’ itself means ‘deep respect and veneration for some... person regarded as having a sacred or exalted character’. If this standard English definition is not sufficient to put an end to the practice of addressing men as ‘Reverend’, one wonders if anything will. Note the dates. In 1485, Popery reigned in England. In 1642, Laud’s Episcopalianism was at the start of its life-and-death struggle with Presbyterianism for political mastery of State religion in England. We need be in no doubt as to the stable from which ‘Reverend’ came.

To say that the use of ‘Reverend’ causes ‘a *very slight* difficulty’, as Peter Masters did,<sup>9</sup> is far otherwise. I find such a comment staggering. The use of ‘Reverend’ for a man is an abomination. And whatever men may say to the contrary, ‘Reverend Bloggs’ *is* accorded great respect and fawned upon because people think, as Masters admitted: ‘Certainly the literal meaning calls for the holder of the title to be revered or accorded with great respect because he has been invested with religious authority’. Reader, I suggest that this is not only the literal meaning; in practice it is precisely what happens when a man is called ‘Reverend’. He *is* accorded great respect and fawned upon because people *do* think he has religious authority. Indeed, he *does* have it! He is special, different.

And as for Masters’ defence of the use of ‘Reverend’ based on its long use in the church – four hundred years – the mind boggles.

---

<sup>9</sup> Masters: ‘Titles’ p34, emphasis his. This the fullest defence of the use of titles in the church, at least as far as I have seen. Masters based his arguments, strangely enough, upon the very passage which forbids the practice, Matt. 23:8-10. Even so, he very properly made the point that Jesus was referring to titles of honour and position in the church, and only in the church. ‘The Lord’s words are... about titles used in the church, and not in the world at large,’ he wrote. This is true; whatever Jesus here forbids, he forbids in the church. In other words, something which is perfectly acceptable in the world, as far as the use of titles is concerned, is totally unacceptable in the church. This is the position in Matt. 23:8-10.

## *The Use of Titles*

This sad fact does not justify his claim that to use the title does not go against the law of Christ: ‘In such a context, it can hardly be regarded as a breach of the rule of Christ’. I disagree; it can be so regarded. I go further. It *is* a blatant breach of Christ’s command. I called it a *sad* fact; rather, it is a *shameful* fact. Just because an abuse of Scripture is popular, and has been so for four hundred years, does not make it right. Such an argument would justify almost every heresy and abomination which has been foisted on the church (many such having a far longer pedigree). Take infant baptism, baptismal regeneration, the rigmarole of a State Church, the Mass... Isn’t that enough to be going on with? They are all long enough in the tooth.

What is more, by Masters’ own admission, the use of the offensive title for gospel ministers is a mere four hundred years old. Reader, what happened in the previous sixteen hundred years? Let us get back to the New Testament. Why do we have to put up with these ‘modern’ abominations and inventions in the church? How can those who contend for the Regulative Principle use them? What Christ expects from his people is obedience to what he has commanded. What he does not expect, and what he will not tolerate, is for his people to do – and try to justify doing – what he has forbidden. To contradict Christ is to offer will-worship, the miserable invention of man.

Although it is a bit rich, coming from an Anglican bishop (‘my Lord’, and all that), nevertheless, as J.C.Ryle rightly pointed out, while we must have a proper esteem for those over us in the Lord (1 Thess. 5:12-13):

But still we must be very careful that we do not insensibly give to ministers a place and an honour which do not belong to them: we must never allow them to come between ourselves and Christ... They are not mediators who can undertake to manage our soul’s affairs with God... Let us never forget these things. Such cautions are always useful: human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister, than an invisible Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Take Ryle’s last sentiment. ‘Human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister, than an invisible Christ’. Ryle was right.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ryle: *Matthew* pp299-300.



## *The Use of Titles*

The disease was endemic in Israel of old, its symptoms clearly seen in their preference for the attractions of visible idols as opposed to the true and invisible God himself (Isa. 44). It is with us today. Smallpox may have been eradicated, and the dodo be extinct, but not *this*, this love of an entitled minister. Let's call a spade a spade. We are talking about priestcraft.

As for Ryle's main point, in the churches today, pastors are spoken of with bated breath, they are treated as a class apart, and they are put on a pedestal. How wrong this is. I acknowledge elders have a mandate from God, and they must exercise their ministry with proper authority, as the apostle commanded Timothy and Titus to exercise theirs (1 Tim. 4:11-12; Tit. 2:15). This, however, must not be done in a domineering spirit. They dare not exercise lordship over the flock of God (Mark 10:42-45; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). I suggest, to put it no stronger, that the common use of titles like 'Pastor' and 'Reverend' encourages and bolsters the evil of elevating a class of men to a position in the church which no human being ought ever to have. In light of this, it is grievous that so many (any!) in the church like to have it so.

I am not splitting hairs over this matter of the use of titles in the church. I am also aware of the derivation of 'Mr', but 'Mr' has lost all sense of distinction with the passing of the years – every man is now a 'Mr'; it is no title at all. But 'Pastor' is. It gives kudos. It divides the man from the rest of the church, elevates him above them. And it is abhorrent.

As I have said, church members must acknowledge, recognise, respect, esteem very highly, honour and obey their elders and preachers, in accordance with Scripture (1 Cor. 16:18; Phil. 2:29; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7,17,24), but this must never degenerate into transgression of Christ's command. In any case, to give a man a title is easy. To truly carry out New Testament instructions is difficult, and needs much grace. To give an elder a title is to give him a tawdry bauble. To give him biblical respect is to offer him a glorious crown. If only the churches would realise what wonderful gains – spiritual gains – would accrue from following Christ and rejecting the world in this matter, they would change their ways.

It cuts no ice to try to distinguish, as Masters did, between 'titles of *authority* and *power*, and... titles of *function* or *qualification*', the

## *The Use of Titles*

latter being acceptable, the former unacceptable.<sup>11</sup> Well, I wonder if the average church member really does appreciate just when he can use a title in the church, and when he cannot – according to this. Does the average Christian really understand the distinction between ‘authority and power’ on the one hand, and ‘function and qualification’ on the other? I doubt it. And it is not surprising, since *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* actually lists ‘function’ as part of the definition of ‘power’!

Yet it is acceptable, apparently, happily to address a man in the church as ‘Pastor’, as long as everybody understands that there is no talk about the man’s authority, but about his function. Once again, how many understand this distinction? What is more, I suggest that the vast majority of Christians, if they think about it at all, are doing the very thing which it is said they ought not – they *are* referring to the man’s authority and status. To suggest otherwise is incredible.

It reminds me of the Papist argument to get round the second commandment. Apparently ‘the faithful’ realise they are not offering worship to an idol when they worship it, because they are merely worshipping it! For readers who are not aware of the ins-and-outs of the Papist argument, it involves a play upon words. ‘The faithful’ are supposed to be able to distinguish between two sorts of worship as delineated by two distinct Latin words. Some hope! For those who have actually witnessed ‘the faithful’ bowing, scraping and crossing themselves in front of a statue, and observed how smooth the idol is worn by the countless hands and lips which have caressed it down the years, there can be no doubt what ‘the faithful’ *think* they are doing.

I hasten to add that I do not suggest that the same is going on when men are using titles in the church – at least I hope not – but I am asserting that to believe the average Christian can sort out the logic necessary to keep within the bounds of Christ’s rules, according to the definition laid down by some Reformed teachers, and to claim that he does it, is too much to swallow.

So let us drop the use of titles in the church.

---

<sup>11</sup> Masters: ‘Titles’ p34, emphasis his.