

Miall on Clericalism

Miall agreed that Scripture speaks of the governing and teaching ministry in the church. But he had a warning:

What I do not find in the New Testament is that to these elders or overseers... the work of teaching, whether in the church or out of it, is exclusively vouchsafed... Christian disciples generally are exhorted to edify one another.¹

Miall was rightly arguing for the priesthood of all believers. He had more to say on this largely-ignored topic, ignored by so many believers to their lasting cost – both individually and corporately. Miall was clear as to the wrongness of so much current practice:

The New Testament [does] not authorise the conclusion that it is the prerogative, or the peculiar and exclusive duty, of any class in the church of Christ to communicate to others the gospel of God... Nor [does it authorise] a monopoly of those instructional ministrations whereby the church is to be edified, or the world converted. Nor [does it authorise] that... the essential and distinctive idea which the sacred writings attach to the spiritual ‘overseer’ is leading the devotions of a church, preaching the word, dispensing the ordinances, visiting the sick, and engrossing all [its] spiritual functions.²

I pause. Miall, it surely does not need saying, is poking a sacred cow, and doing so using a sharp stick. How common it is for a church to get – to ‘call’ – ‘a pastor’, and leave everything to him. ‘That’s a minister’s work’, as I have been told. Indeed, ‘pastors’ rather like it that way. Miall, however, was not content just to put his finger on the problem. He was calling for reform. But – and here he issued a necessary caveat – these things must be put right, without, of course, jettisoning the baby along with the bathwater:

¹ Miall p237.

² Miall pp238-239.

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...without shutting him [that is, the minister, elder, pastor, overseer (whatever word you use)]³ out from a due and, perhaps, a prominent, share of these engagements,⁴ governing the Christian community, taking care that Christ's law is obeyed, and so ordering affairs as that Christ's purpose may be accomplished. Under the regulating moral power of the church's embodied authority, all the aptitudes, gifts, powers and influences of each member are to be freely exercised, in accordance with the beautiful exhortation of the apostle: 'Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given us; whether prophecy, let us prophesy...'.⁵

In other words, while the churches must be governed, that governance must not eliminate the proper exercise of the priesthood of all believers. Indeed, I would go further. One of the main ends of the stated governing and teaching ministry is to stimulate the all-body ministry of the church, not merely tolerate it – or, what is worse, doff its cap at it in principle, but let it dwindle to nothing. This stimulus to which I refer is precisely the teaching of the apostle in Ephesians 4. This merits – demands – further study. For my views on this and related subjects, see my *Pastor* and *The Priesthood*.

Miall continued:

³ I am allowing Miall's use of the singular. It may be so used generically. But every New Testament church, as far as we know, had a plurality of elders. Churches today which have a single elder (except in the case of extreme necessity) are taking a step away from the New Testament pattern, a step fraught with danger, as history and experience shows time and again. It is, in truth, a step towards the very thing Miall was rightly deploring. Let me give it its proper name: popery. Of course, I exempt from this stricture those churches where, by force of circumstances, there is only one capable man in the assembly; a pioneer work, for instance. Incidentally, talk of 'pastor and deacons', and the growing use of 'pastor and elders', does nothing to blunt my claim.

⁴ I have to confess Miall's English defeats me here. The above represents my best guess. This is what he wrote: '...engrossing all spiritual functions; but without shutting him out from a due, and, perhaps, a prominent share of the engagements'.

⁵ Miall p239.

Taking my views directly from the New Testament, I can draw no other conclusion than that the presentation of divine truth to the minds of others, its elucidation, and its enforcement, occupied, in apostolic times, a place alongside... other 'gifts', by the exercise of which, under the regulating authority of the ruling power, disciples might be edified, or unbelievers won over to the faith.⁶

Yet again, alas, an over-long sentence. Let me try to simplify. The New Testament must be our guide. In the New Testament it is clear that the ability to preach/teach is one of the gifts of the Spirit, but only one. Nor is it necessarily the chief gift. See Romans 12:3-8, for instance. Indeed, what is the best gift? Paul to the Corinthians:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way (1 Cor. 12:27-31).

And we all know what this 'more excellent way' is. With no chapter division, Paul leads straight into 1 Corinthians 13, that panegyric on love. Christ laid it on the line, did he not? Let us hear him:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

To continue with my 'simplification' of Miall's prose: the New Testament shows the *ekklēsia* must be governed so that all the saints can exercise their God-given ministry; that is, the whole body making full use of the entire range of the Spirit's gifts to edify the saints and bring sinners to Christ.

Miall went for the jugular:

⁶ Miall p240.

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The precise object I have kept in view in the foregoing observations is a statement of my belief that the New Testament does not give the smallest countenance to the notion represented by the phrase ‘the sacred order of the Christian ministry’.⁷

In other words, clericalism should never be allowed to rear its head. But clericalism is precisely what rules the roost in many churches! I am talking about the corruptions brought into the new covenant by the Fathers, the sweeping changes they made to Christ’s legacy. They made these fatal alterations, without warrant, by going back to the old covenant for their principles and practice. And this inevitably – if not designedly – led to such things as an excessive emphasis upon ‘the Minister’ and ‘the Ministry’, ordination, the use of titles, the wearing of garb, sacramentalism and sacerdotalism. And so on. Let me give but one example. What about the case of a wife who talks of her husband in this way: ‘Pastor likes cereal, toast and coffee for breakfast’? I am not making this up! Nor is it some innocent piece of nonsense. It is, at bottom, nothing less than clericalism.

And – let me say it loud and clear – this clericalism is insidious, if not rampant, not least among churches which most vehemently speak against the idea! ‘Touch not the Lord’s anointed’, a mantra not unknown in certain evangelical circles, leads to a kind of popery, where most believers take their doctrine from the pulpit,⁸ which doctrine can change at the drop of a hat with the change of ‘pastor’.⁹ Moreover, the

⁷ Miall p241.

⁸ Actually, I fear I am giving too much clout to the pulpit in saying this. Most believers, I am persuaded draw their theology from the Confession or the hymn book.

⁹ Witness the adjustments – revolutions – which took place after C.H.Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, and at Westminster Chapel after D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Those changes took a little time to come, but come they did. And how!

celebrated vicar of Bray has fathered many sons who have taken ‘sacred orders’ and ‘wear the cloth’.¹⁰

Miall pressed on with his point:

The vaguest and most general form in which the erroneous impression shows itself is in a broad classification of society into clerical and lay... The minister is as [a] minister segregated from the mass, and becomes, in virtue of his calling, a member of a consecrated order. He is supposed to have passed out of the ordinary ranks of life in obedience to an inward call, and have joined a company from which the churches are to take their rulers and teachers.¹¹

Quite! I liken this disgraceful rigmarole to the movement of professional football players and managers between clubs. I speak of the United Kingdom. I dare say the same may be said of baseball, basketball or football in the United States, or whatever, wherever.

Miall went on. Granting that the church has selected the new man from this pool of putative pastors:

Thenceforth, it becomes his special and appropriate function to preach the gospel and to administer its ordinances. He is regarded as, in some sort, not merely qualified by his gifts, but authorised by his profession, to discharge duties with which laymen should not meddle... He is... A MINISTER¹² – he is in the sacred office – he has all the attributes of ‘the order’. A stress is laid upon his religious opinions, on this account, which would not be considered due to the clearness of his perceptions, or to the strength of his judgment.¹³

In other words, simply because he is ‘the pastor’ or whatever, this fits the man in question to pontificate on spiritual matters. Because of his sacred office, because he is in the sacred order,

¹⁰ The vicar of Bray, who appeared in an 18th-century satirical song, was one who could and would change his religious opinions to stay in office during the rapid swings in the uniform religion being enforced by law during the 16th, 17th and early 18th centuries.

¹¹ Miall pp241-232.

¹² My upper case. The same applies below.

¹³ Miall p242.

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...he is the fitting man, be his abilities or merits in other respects what they may, to conduct any united exercises of a purely religious character – to ask God’s blessing at social and public entertainments, to give a spiritual sanctity to marriages and interments, to administer baptism, to dispense the supper of the Lord. He claims, and he generally receives, respect, not merely on account of the office which he fills... but on account of the sacred brotherhood to which he belongs... Others agree with himself in holding that there is a difference which he owes to ‘the cloth’.¹⁴

Nonconformists must not be smug and shuffle off this talk of ‘the cloth’, ‘taking sacred or holy orders’, and such like, to Anglicans in the days of Jane Austen. Inflated views of ‘the ministry’ are very much alive – though the language is different, sometimes even unspoken – among Nonconformists today. The Reformed are especially prone to the unscriptural nonsense. We must never forget that in the New Testament the words for ‘minister’ are derogatory expressions, belittling terms, which carry the connotation of lowliness, humiliation, insult, scorn and contempt.¹⁵ How easily, how happily, how ignorantly we turn things upside down!

Miall had more to say of ‘the cleric’, ‘the pastor’, or whatever:

The pulpit is his, as it were, by right of his ordination; and, even if others are sometimes admitted there, they are there rather by a tolerated irregularity than by the inherent right of their qualifications. In short, however it may be repudiated in words, or even in intention, the position allotted to him by the churches is one of a modified sacerdotalism.¹⁶

Sacerdotalism! How important an observation Miall has made, and how true! Sacerdotalists believe that certain men have the ability, the gift, the power and the right to administer the actions in question, and thereby convey the grace, the gift or whatever they claim to be inherent in those actions. Naturally, therefore, those who like the system happily delegate vital

¹⁴ Miall pp242-243.

¹⁵ See my *Pastor* pp119-134.

¹⁶ Miall p243.

parts of their religion – even their spiritual life – into the hands of these men, who, they believe, because they have been consecrated or ordained, are better able, more qualified to carry it out for them.¹⁷ In such a system, worship and spiritual service is a specialised task best left to a special class – priests – who do it on behalf of the rest. Hence arose the unbiblical notion of the clergy and the laity – with all its attendant and well-documented curses of priestcraft.

Miall continued with his criticism of ‘the priest’ or ‘the pastor’, the role he plays in Christendom. First, Miall spelled out that role:

It is his peculiar prerogative to meddle with and manage all the public manifestations of spiritual life and godliness.¹⁸

Then he moved in for the kill, albeit far too gently:

Now, I do not believe that Jesus Christ ever instituted such an order in his churches – or that the apostles anywhere hint at its existence. In sacred *offices*, I do believe, and for them I cherish a profound respect; in a sacred *order*, I have no faith whatever. To my view it is at variance with the genius of the gospel, in opposition to the intimations of the New Testament writers, and productive of the most pernicious results.¹⁹

Wow! Even though Miall was too gentle, I can see why some gatekeepers (not least, those at the Exeter Hall), when they clapped eyes on such a trenchant manuscript, took alarm, and therefore closed the gates against him. But may his forceful voice be heard today! The churches, believers, need to hear it.

Miall addressed the question of ‘preaching’, as we find it, on the one hand, in the New Testament and, on the other, in Christendom; namely, ‘what, in our day, goes under the name

¹⁷ Take but one example. Many believers (whether they are prepared to admit it or not) instinctively feel that a professional minister is the only proper person to conduct a funeral. It makes it ‘right’ for the deceased.

¹⁸ Miall p243.

¹⁹ Miall p243.

of preaching'. Alas, he used sentences of inordinate length. Even so, I will quote the extract in full, as it stands, and then try to simplify.

Miall:

Preaching, according to the usage of New Testament writers, was²⁰ a solemn proclamation of God's message of mercy to the world, and to have been undertaken by all who had opportunity and ability. When the exercise of the gift of utterance for the edification of the churches is referred to, 'teaching' is a term more commonly employed – and on one occasion, as distinct from teaching, 'exhortation'. Gathering up the few scraps of information scattered through the Acts of the Apostles, and the apostolic letters, and reading them by the light of that collateral knowledge which we obtain from these and other sources, it seems probable the first meetings of... churches were mainly devotional, interspersed with free interchanges of thought upon the grand theme which filled and fired every heart – that, in these spiritual interchanges, gifts of teaching were soon developed – that as order began to be felt necessary, and experience and apostolical direction enforced attention to it, teaching was distinctly associated with office, and they who have been set apart to do this work gave themselves as uninterruptedly to it as possible. A church presided over by... bishops,²¹ themselves generally 'apt to teach', and possessing among its members some qualified by the gift of utterance to edify the body, who, when recognised as such, were appointed to the office of teaching and exhortation, and whose labours, 'in word and doctrine', in common with those of the elders,²² were regulated by the authority to which all did deference – seems to me to come nearest, in point of form, to those organised Christian societies to which Paul addresses several letters. All the believers in one city or town associated together in spiritual fellowship, meeting statedly for prayer, praise and the breaking of bread – not necessarily in one

²⁰ Miall was weak; he had 'appears to have been'.

²¹ Miall had 'a bishop, or bishops'. The churches of the New Testament had a plurality of bishops, overseers or elders.

²² Miall was making a common mistake here. The bishop, overseer and elder is one and the same. They are not different offices. See my *Pastor*.

place, but often in several – and instructed, more or less formally, by men set apart for that purpose, in the things pertaining to the kingdom of God, or stimulated by exhortation to all holy living and enterprise, governed by spiritual rulers, most of whom were themselves qualified to expound the word of God, and bound every one of them to use such gifts as they had, in winning the unbelieving to the faith of Christ, answers, I think, pretty nearly to the complete set-up²³ of such a church as New Testament hints, put together with intelligent and reverend care, would present to our view. I cannot see a shadow of probability that the instruction of each association of believers, the proclamation of the gospel to an unbelieving world, and the spiritual oversight of the body, constituted the peculiar functions of a special officer, in whom a monopoly of religious teaching was vested. A MINISTER, in our sense of the term [that is, the wrongheaded-view we have of teachers ever since the Fathers introduced old-covenant ideas into the *ekklēsia*] – an individual engrossing in his own person the entire [teaching] authority in the church – qualified alone, as a member of a distinct and sacred order, to take the oversight of a Christian community, and to impart to it the bread of life – in [a] word, one set apart to do, in connection with the church over which he presides, all that is done in directing the minds, in comforting or rousing the consciences, in warming the hearts of its members, and proclaiming to others the ‘glorious gospel of the blessed God’ – A MINISTER, I repeat, in our sense of the term, does not appear to me to be shadowed forth in the inspired writings.²⁴

Miall’s fog index here – see note at the start of this book – has vanished far off the scale, reaching the stratosphere. This makes the text practically impossible to grasp first time off the bat. For some, I fear, it would prove unfathomable no matter how much midnight oil they burned poring over it. So let me try to recast the above. It is essential to do this since Miall was saying weighty things, and it would be a pity of the greatest moment if his argument was lost in a linguistic fog because of his bad style.

²³ Miall had ‘*tout ensemble*’.

²⁴ Miall pp245-247.

Miall was saying that churches should be ruled by elders. He, as I have noted, distinguished between bishops and elders. In that, he was mistaken. Leaving that to one side, Miall made the point that the first believers met for spiritual purposes, and this included teaching. This teaching was to promote the progressive sanctification of believers, and stimulate efforts to reach the lost with the gospel. I would go further, since the New Testament plainly goes further. Scripture is explicit: the teaching ministry should stimulate the all-body ministry of the *ekklēsia*; it is designed for that very purpose. The idea that ‘ministry’ is the work of a certain section of the *ekklēsia* – the priesthood of some (a few) believers – is utterly at variance with the new covenant. As I have argued, the common view of ‘the ministry’ comes from Christendom, not Scripture. The ‘one-man ministry’, or even the ‘few-men ministry’, are unscriptural concepts. Ubiquitous in Christendom they are, certainly, but foreign to the new covenant they most definitely are, as is made clear in the New Testament. These are vital points, points which should never be forgotten. In the next half century after Miall, Edwin Hatch would, by meticulous historical research, add substantial weight to these claims.²⁵

I find it indescribably sad – but not surprising, given prophetic warnings in the New Testament (Matt. 24:4-51; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; 2 Tim. 3:1-9, and so on) – that believers and churches seem so slow to learn, so prone to repeat old mistakes, or so eager to cling to unscriptural practices. Having said that, are we not told that Israel was guilty of something similar? God used Jeremiah to complain of his people:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their

²⁵ See Edwin Hatch: *The Organisation of the Early Christian Churches*, Rivingtons, London, 1881; *The Growth of Church Institutions*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1888; *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church*, Williams and Norgate, London, 1907. See my *Pastor*.

direction; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer. 5:30-31).

Miall hit the nail right on its head when he spoke of practices common among evangelicals being the consequences of Christendom. Those practices, he declared, ‘are a relic, and a very absurd relic, of the old sacerdotal system’; that is, the medieval Church, which came about as a direct result of the Fathers’ perfidy²⁶ in going back to the old covenant. Those practices, said Miall:

...delegated the whole business of religion to the priesthood, and... placed the efficacy of priestly mediation chiefly in a minute observance of external forms and ‘bodily exercises’. It is surely high time that the... churches²⁷ in Great Britain had got above such puerile trumpery.²⁸

So, according to Miall, this is how it was in the 1840s. So, I argue, it is in 2018. Take one illustration; namely, the Tractarian (or Oxford) Movement. This must not be forgotten or dismissed as a mere historical blip. From 1833-1841, the High-Church party in the Church of England, mostly associated with Oxford University, produced a series of ‘Tracts for the Times’. The members of that Movement, the writers of ‘Tracts’ in particular, went back to the Fathers, and thus, through their work, led many to full-blown Romanism. In this, they were acting as consistent Anglicans. What? Yes, indeed. Anglicanism does not draw its principles directly from Scripture but Scripture as seen through the eyes of the Fathers.²⁹

The arch-Tractarian, John Henry Newman (1801-1890), who started as an evangelical Anglican, became an Anglo-

²⁶ I regard the Fathers’ return to the old covenant as a betrayal of the principles of the new covenant. Hence my use of ‘perfidy’. I call upon the warning passages of Hebrews in support (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:7 – 4:13; 6:1-8; 10:26-39; 12:15-29).

²⁷ Miall had ‘Christian churches’. There are no others. I will not repeat this note.

²⁸ Miall pp266-267.

²⁹ See my *Pastor* pp217-218.

Catholic, finally becoming a Roman Catholic in 1845, was created cardinal in 1879, was beatified in 2010, and, as I write, awaits one more ‘miracle’ to be canonised. In his day, he was instrumental in leading many into Rome, and this trend has not abated in the years following his death. He and his work cast a dark shadow to this day.

Now that, as I say, is but one example of what I am (and Miall was) talking about. A glaring example, true, but similar things are going on in a lesser way, even in Nonconformist circles. Many evangelicals show a fondness for ‘trumpery’. Indeed, if I read the signs aright, they show a growing fondness for it.

Miall explained: ‘Preaching has assumed too much the air of a business’.³⁰ He could say that again! And in two respects: marketing and professionalism. As for marketing – the marketing of Christ, the gospel and the church, ‘selling’ him as a product to consumers, and doing so according to the principles of global business – I say nothing more here since I intend to publish on the subject. I stick with Miall’s point; namely, professionalism. Professionalism truly is a great curse. Competence is one thing; professionalism is quite another. This is another subject that merits – demands – further study.³¹

Iain H. Murray quoted D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

Most of our services are terribly depressing! I am amazed people still go... There is nothing to make a stranger feel he is missing something – instead he finds this awful weight!... Thus people come together in order to depart.. I suggest to you that our greatest danger is the danger of professionalism. We do not stop sufficiently frequently to ask ourselves what we are really doing. The danger is of just facing a text, and treating it as an end in itself, with a strange detachment... Our approach is wrong... Our danger is to forget people altogether... We are too objective... This leads to a mechanical approach to preaching... Charles Haddon Spurgeon... his sermons had form, thrust, and the impact of a

³⁰ Miall p282.

³¹ For my views, see my *Pastor; The Priesthood; Baptist*.

message... There ought to be an impact... [not] make preaching intellectual only. Nor should it be just emotional... You will not win people to teaching if you are a dull teacher!... [Lloyd-Jones quoted a lady:] ‘...Many of our Reformed preachers... are so dull’. If you preach without moving people you have failed... To hear of ‘excellent lectures on doctrine’ being given on a Sunday night is truly appalling.³²

Quite!

Just to illustrate the contemporary relevance of this chapter, here is an excursus, one which deals with an up-to-date example of what this chapter has been about.

Excursus: James M. Renihan and the Founders Conference

In his discourse on Romans 10:14-17, ‘Preaching as a Means of Grace’,³³ at the 2014 Founders Conference, Heritage Baptist Church, Mansfield, Texas, James M. Renihan was clear as to what ARBCA (Association of Reformed Baptist Churches of America) stands for as regards preaching. Renihan was heavy on the institutional aspect of preaching and preachers. He spoke of the men involved as ‘church-sent men’, this being ‘a pre-condition’ for reaching sinners with the gospel. These men must be ‘commissioned’, authorised to the ‘preaching office’. He even spoke warmly of ‘the clerical robe’ – though he himself did not favour its use. He told us his reason: it hid the preacher, he said. This explanation takes my breath away. How wrong can one be? Hide the preacher? Clerical garb makes a man *stand out* from the *hoi polloi* as one of the special group; he is one of the clerics as opposed to the rest – the lay people. Indeed, Renihan addressed the ministers and the lay as ‘you and your people’. He was clear that Christ speaks through such appointed, commissioned

³² Iain H. Murray: *Lloyd-Jones: Messenger of Grace*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2008, pp101-104.

³³ I find the title objectionable, as I do other titles in that same series; namely, ‘Baptism as a Means of Grace’; ‘Baptist Confessions and the Means of Grace’.

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ministers. This means, of course, for many, that such men are the Lord's anointed, and must, therefore, be above question. That certainly is the risk. And history shows not a few fall into it. But where does Acts 17:11 fit into this scheme?

The conclusion is beyond doubt. Preaching is an institutional task, a work to be done only by men properly commissioned as ministers, men appointed, recognised, ordained, commissioned by the church. Unless such men preach, sinners will not be reached with the gospel. This is just the thing that Miall was so strong against. And so am I.³⁴

³⁴ In addition to my other works, see my *Baptist*.