

October - December 2025

# The Link

**NORTH ROAD CHAPEL**

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**BIDEFORD**

# THE BOOK OF JONAH

## Epilogue – The Parable of the Gourd

*“But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind . . . He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them: He enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again.”*

(Job 12:7-10, 23)

### The Natural World

Among the many remarkable features of the Book of Jonah is the prominent place occupied by aspects of the natural world. To many readers, it is known as the story of ‘Jonah and the Whale’ – the ‘great fish’ taking a leading role alongside the prophet in the Biblical account. Nor is this the only example. It is recorded that: *“the Lord sent out a great wind into the sea”* (ch. 1:4); *“the Lord had prepared a great fish”* (ch. 1:17); *“the Lord spake unto the fish”* (ch. 2:10); *“the Lord God prepared a gourd”* (ch. 4:6); *“God prepared a worm”* (ch. 4:7); *“God prepared a vehement east wind”* (ch. 4:8). Indeed, the short book ends in a surprising way, with God remarking upon all the livestock in Nineveh and its environs, which amounted to *“much cattle”* (ch. 4:11).

Modern science – zoology and meteorology – may have discovered much about animal behaviour, or the causes of the weather; but let none suppose that this has ‘disproved God’, or eliminated His divine involvement in these matters. The phenomena that have been uncovered in more recent times were always in existence – this modest increase in human understanding does not thereby reduce God. If ‘scientific principles’ or ‘physical laws’ are spoken of, it should be asked: “who instituted or commanded them? Why are they so rigorously obeyed?”

The fact that the natural world functions according to definable rules and consistent patterns does not deny creation and the existence of God, but tends only to prove it (cf Psalm 148:6). He continues to be intimately concerned in every aspect of the world He has made, from the least sparrow (cf Matthew 10:29) to entire oceans (cf Job 38:8-11). That these things are inanimate, or incognisant of Him, does not prevent them from performing His will: *“Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling His word”* (Psalm 148:8); and of the animal kingdom it is said: *“These wait all upon Thee”* (Psalm 104:27). Little wonder then, that God should know precisely how many cattle existed in Nineveh, since He had given them existence, and reckoned them His servants: *“For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are Mine . . . for the world is Mine, and the fulness thereof”* (Psalm 50:10-12).

It did not require an act of supernatural generation to bring into the Mediterranean Sea a creature capable of swallowing Jonah alive, any more than it required an extraordinary miracle to raise up a caterpillar. God, who is timeless, eternal and omniscient, can work perfectly within His own ‘rules’ – if necessary sustaining generations of giant fish from creation to the late 700s BC, appointing a particular region of the sea for their preferred habitat, instilling the practice of devouring their prey whole – for precisely that day, and indeed the very seconds of that day, in which Jonah would be struggling in those same storm-tossed waters, at the point of drowning. God could create the fly, that laid the egg, that hatched into a gourd-eating larva, whose far distant descendant crawled one evening across the hot desert sand to the east of Nineveh, in search of nourishment. Even as it was God who, the very night before, had ordained that conditions should combine to prompt the sudden and rapid growth of a gourd-seed, which had perhaps lain underground for years in the very spot that Jonah selected as his vantage-point. For *“known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world”* (Acts 15:18). When the prophet was later challenged with the fact that **he** had not laboured

neither made these things to grow (cf ch. 4:10), what was the implication of those words? That, in the absence of human intervention, plants and animals had come about by mere coincidence, or the arbitrary forces of nature? No – rather that the labour and work was **God's**, and the cause was Divine: “*He causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man*” (Psalm 104:14)

It should be noted, however, that the natural world is also grievously afflicted by sin. When convicted by the preaching of Jonah, the Ninevites’ penitential response included that “*neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth ... Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?*” (Jonah 3:7-9). This strange practice serves to illustrate the point: while dumb beasts could not be charged with wickedness, they were doomed by the sins of their Assyrian masters. If God had sent the threatened overthrow upon the city, whether by natural disaster or enemy armies, men and animals would have suffered and perished alike – the tens of thousands of human inhabitants, and “*much cattle*”.

This solemn fact applies more broadly to the world at large: “*For the [creation] was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope ... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now*” (Romans 8:20, 22). The first Adam, federal head of the human race and equally of the material creation over which God had placed him, grossly abused his position of responsibility and trust, and cursed not only all his progeny, but the whole physical world – which was thereafter dreadfully altered: “*cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee*” (Genesis 3:17-18). Like its sinful human tenants, the globe was also doomed to judgment, and its own sentence (cf 2 Peter 3:10-12, Psalm 102:25-26). It is a great act of God’s mercy that, even in its fallen condition, and irrevocably marred

by sin, the non-human creation still obeys His laws and performs His will. After millennia of waxing worse and worse, still today “*the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge*” (Psalm 19:1-2).

## **Sinful Man**

Another key ‘character’ in the narrative of the Book of Jonah, is the city of Nineveh, representing (as its capital) the whole Assyrian Empire. Tracing its origins back to early post-flood society (cf Genesis 10:11), its territory was well established by the time of Abraham (cf Genesis 25:18), and by Jonah’s era was an international superpower. For its geographical reach, imperial ambitions and sheer scale, it is reckoned by many secular historians as being the first ‘true’ world empire. At its greatest extent (attained about a century later) it stretched some 1500 miles from Egypt to the Persian Gulf, and northward into modern-day Turkey; while Nineveh became, for about 50 years, the most populous city in the world. However, it was dominated by idolatry. “Asshur” was the title of its principal god, which gave rise to the name of the country “Assyria”, the two being used synonymously (cf Numbers 24:22, 24; Hosea 14:3). “Nineveh” was named for another false deity, meaning ‘the House of Ishtar’. In their invasion, conquest, and enforced depopulation of Middle Eastern countries, the Assyrians became infamous for brutality and slaughter – depictions of which exist in museums to the present day. Said Hezekiah: “*Of a truth, Lord, the kings of Assyria have laid waste all the nations, and their countries*” (Isaiah 37:18); while the divine assessment was: “*Woe to the bloody city! it is all full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not . . . for upon whom hath not thy wickedness passed continually?*” (Nahum 3:1, 19).

For all this wickedness, Assyria can hardly be described as exceptional, or extreme. Various Bible verses draw parallels between Assyria and Egypt, an adjacent world power (cf Isaiah 10:24, 11:16). In the process

of time, the Babylonian empire would eclipse them both; then the Persian, the Greek, the Roman – and so on through the course of history. Every one of these world powers had its characteristic vices, and was notorious for particular forms of iniquity. The same is true of 21<sup>st</sup> Century nations today; there is immorality, perversion and licentiousness prevalent in modern Britain, such that an ancient Assyrian might baulk at. In the final analysis: *“they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one”* (Romans 3:9-12).

Yet fiery judgment does not instantaneously fall upon wicked nations and peoples. Quite the contrary: God is seen to raise them up, bring them into existence, sustain them for centuries, and prosper them even in the midst of their iniquities. He even favours Egypt with a Joseph, or Moses; sends Jonah to Nineveh, Daniel to Babylon, Paul unto Rome. In these sin-blighted lands He causes truth to be preached, and opportunity to be given for repentance and salvation. How are these acts of sovereignty and providence to be explained? Is God the author of sin, if He grants being to these kingdoms of sinful men? Is there a miscarriage of justice, when He permits them to continue so long in their wickedness? Is there terrible unfairness if they are favoured with the ‘preaching of righteousness’ in their undeserving midst? Jonah evidently thought so. But he, as we, must be taught the way of God more perfectly.

### **Sinful Men Likened to the Natural World**

In the Lord’s mercies, this difficult concept is taught in the simplest of ways – by a parable, or analogy. In Jonah’s case, the parable was not merely hypothetical: God gave an object lesson. The lesson was designed to show a monumental contradiction in Jonah’s thinking. The prophet was very angry; doubly angry. But he was angry in two completely opposite directions at the same time – and failed to see his

inconsistency. He was angry that the gourd **was** destroyed; and he was simultaneously angry that Assyria **was not** destroyed. “But Assyria and the gourd are one and the same” says God. In precisely the same way that He ‘prepared the gourd’, but to an even greater extent, He ‘prepared Assyria’ – and can be said to ‘prepare’ all the nations and empires of the world. This does not require an act of spontaneous creation: God acts across the sweep of time, working all things together towards a particular object. As the hymn says:

“The kingdoms of this world  
Lie in His hand;  
See how they rise or fall  
At His command.” (Charles, tr. Owen)

echoing the Scripture: “*And He changeth the times and the seasons: He removeth kings, and setteth up kings*” (Daniel 2:21).

God may choose to do this for a variety of reasons. In many cases, nations of ungodly men and women, their rulers and leaders, have been used of God to achieve practical good – whether in the spread of education and civilisation, or the advancement of medicine, science or technology. Even some of the most morally and ethically impaired of empires have brought times of stability, freedom from war, or materially improved the lives of their citizens. In so doing, they may have inadvertently aided the Lord’s people, or unconsciously furthered the cause of His truth – even as the gourd unwittingly sheltered Jonah. Of Assyria, God said: “*Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs . . . All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs, and under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, and under his shadow dwelt all great nations . . . I have made him fair by the multitude of his branches*” (Ezekiel 31:3, 6, 9). Another purpose the Lord may have, is to make one nation or people the means of judging another, and use them punitively. This was certainly the case here, as Assyria was made the instrument whereby God’s threatenings against the

northern kingdom of Israel were fulfilled in 722 BC: *“O Assyrian, the rod of Mine anger, and the staff in their hand is Mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of My wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Howbeit he meaneth not so, neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy and cut off nations not a few”* (Isaiah 10:5-7).

This text highlights another aspect of truth: the mass of fallen humanity, in its various countries, is not required to believe God, or even acknowledge His existence, in order to fulfil His purposes – any more than the gourd needed to know it overshadowed Jonah, or the whale intentionally to swallow him. The world pursues its own sinful agenda, with its own sinful motivations, raging and imagining vain things against the Lord and His anointed, even while it conforms to His inexorable sovereignty. *“Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee”* (Psalm 76:10). Whether by means of an unclean beast (cf 1 Kings 17:4-6) or godless men (cf Isaiah 7:17-20), the Lord says: *“My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure: calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth My counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it”* (Isaiah 46:10-11).

## **The Gospel According to Jonah**

Behold the gourd! It is sick and ready to die. It is withering away. A worm has gnawed at the root of it. Well Jonah – what of that? It sprang up without any effort on your part; it served a useful purpose for a season and provided you with shelter; then it played host to a harmful parasite which has resulted in its fall. It is merely an insensible plant. What is lost if it perish? Cast it aside. ‘Nay’ says Jonah, ‘I am angered by this situation’ (literally – ‘his ire was kindled’). ‘This gourd served me well in yesterday’s noontide heat, and granted some welcome shelter – it is unfair that it should perish so soon – I want it to be spared, and live!’ *“Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?”* asks the Divine Teacher. ‘To

how much greater a degree should I then desire to spare Assyria, which I have brought into existence and nurtured over the course of 1,500 years – to preserve Nineveh, with its 120,000 inhabitants, and its abundance of cattle?’ (cf Jonah 4:9-11).

In the case of ancient Assyria – in the case of **all** the nations of the world – what is the ‘worm’ that so threatens their existence, and seems certain to precipitate their final fall? What but that worm which dieth not (cf Mark 9:44), which breeds wherever God’s word is disobeyed (cf Exodus 16:20), which is the cause of the death and decay of men’s mortal bodies (cf Job 19:26) – the worm of **sin**. And what is the Lord’s divine attitude, as He beholds this dreadful situation amongst the children of men? Does He dismissively consign them all to a well-deserved Hell? They are wilfully ignorant or at enmity against Him; they have served their purpose; they have harboured the fatal parasite of sin. Should they not receive the due penalty of their misdeeds? The gourd is withering – let it die! The reed is bruised – break it off! *“I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?”* (Luke 13:7).

Mercifully, graciously, this is **not** the case. *“He answering [saith] ... let it alone ... till I shall dig about it, and dung it”* (Luke 13:8). *“A bruised reed shall He not break, and the smoking flax shall He not quench”* (Isaiah 42:3). Coming and finding the plague of sin, sure to result in death, He is not angry **at** the gourd, but angry **for** the gourd – which same Hebrew word may equally be translated as “grieved” (cf 1 Samuel 15:11), or “earnestly” (cf Nehemiah 3:20). Isaiah wonderfully describes the Saviour’s reaction upon beholding the abysmal state of humanity: *“The Lord saw it, and it displeased Him that there was no judgment. And He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore His arm brought salvation unto Him; and His righteousness, it sustained Him. For He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon His head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak”* (Isaiah 59:15-17).

Just **how** grieved was the Lord about the dire effects of sin? Precisely how zealous to rescue and preserve a remnant of fallen humanity? How angry about the desperate plight of the gourd? “*Even unto death*” (Jonah 4:9). “*Being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (Philippians 2:8).

“How willing was Jesus to die,  
That we fellow-sinners might live!  
The life they could not take away,  
How ready was Jesus to give!” (Swain)

Thus the ill-tempered, rashly-speaking prophet unconsciously became a foreteller of gospel truth, and the Lord Jesus’ saving work is marvellously set forth in another ‘sign of the prophet Jonah’ (cf Matthew 12:39, 16:4).

As well as the instructive comparisons to be drawn between the gourd and fallen mankind, there is also a blessed contrast to register – namely the greater importance and gravity of the human situation, relative to the botanical analogy. If the fate of the gourd was a matter of some justifiable consternation, how infinitely more serious is the state of lost humanity, and in due proportion, how mighty the work of salvation? There is an extrapolation to be performed here, as the Scriptures themselves direct, for whilst a type and illustration from nature may be helpful, it falls far short of the reality: “*Consider the ravens . . . God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls?*” “*Consider the lilies . . . If then God so clothe the grass . . . how much more will He clothe you, O ye of little faith?*” “*Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows*” (Luke 12:24, 27-28, 7). Fear not, ye of little faith! If the gourd be worth a tear, how much more the soul of man? If the Assyrian cattle were a pity to lose, how much more those who, yet in spiritual ignorance, know not left from right, nor right from wrong? If such lengths were warranted to deliver Nineveh, ours too must be ‘so great salvation’ (cf Hebrews 2:3).

R. J. Steward

# LONG SHADOWS

## 5. Forms of Worship (continued)

### The Ministry

By this stage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there is amongst ‘reformed’ churches, a generally-accepted understanding of the nature of the ministry. A man will be appointed to a particular church, who meets the prerequisite criteria of a theological degree, or seminary education, relevant experience or favourable track-record in a previous fellowship, and perceived abilities in preaching. He will be offered a salary, a day-off in the week, a holiday allowance, perhaps a manse, a car, a pension arrangement, terms and conditions all defined in a contract of employment. He will be respectfully called ‘pastor’ by the congregation. He expects to be paid, and they expect a certain level of service in return. So matters may continue, for years, or decades, or until circumstances arise in which the ‘pastor’ moves on to another church. So normalised has this pattern become, that anything which departs from it is looked doubtfully upon as somehow strange or deficient.

From whence has this familiar format arisen? Some seek to find precedent for every detail just described in verses of Scripture (though their efforts are often very tortuous and contrived). The reality is much simpler. A brief survey of church history will quickly show that the practices adopted in non-conforming denominations (as Baptists, Methodists, Independents, Congregationalists, etc) were all essentially aped from Anglicanism, but with a rejection of its worst excesses. The State church had its priests, sometimes called ‘father’, having benefices or ‘livings’, housed in vicarages or rectories, wearing their cassocks and surplices. Dissenting denominations settled for pastors, sometimes called ‘reverend’, having salaries or stipends, housed in a manse, wearing perhaps an academic robe, dog-collar or black tie. The lineage is irrefutable. The names and forms are somewhat different, but the ‘professionalised churchmanship’ is the same – each has its clerical class.

Let these origins be traced back a stage further: what are the customs of the Church of England? None other than those long since established by the Church of Rome, which were never expunged by the so-called Reformation – so closely related to one another as to exist on the continuum of ‘Anglo-Catholicism’. And where did Popery forge its errors? In a melting pot of Roman idolatry and resuscitated Levitical ritual, as described in the previous article. An entirely unworthy template for the arrangements of present-day evangelical congregations.

It will be noted that the early church of the New Testament, and the practices of the first Christians are entirely absent from the brief history outlined above. This is indeed the case. It is to be feared that the ‘apostle’s doctrine’, and the pattern laid down by the Lord through them, has almost completely vanished, eclipsed by the traditions of men, and never truly recovered. Throughout the chequered course of church history, there have been brief revivals of the Biblical form, (as amongst certain Anabaptists, Waldenses, Mennonites and Separatists) but these were invariably suppressed and eradicated by the forces of sacerdotalism.

The charge levelled by John Calvin against Romanism: “They are attempting, forsooth, an ingenious device; they are trying, by a kind of patchwork, to make one religion out of Christianity, Judaism, and Paganism” (*Institutes*, Book 4, Ch. 19) can be applied to the church more widely, still today. This article particularly focusses on how, in contradiction to so many epistolary warnings, aspects of the Jewish priesthood continue to be erroneously perpetuated in the Christian ministry.

As with other aspects of the Old Covenant era, the Levitical priesthood served an important purpose, for a time. That purpose was primarily a figurative and typological one (cf Hebrews 8:5). For example, it illustrated the unobtainably high and holy standard of Deity. Of all the tribes of Israel, only one – Levi – could supply religious officers (cf Numbers 3:5-10). Of that tribe, only members of the house of Aaron

were permitted to act as priests (cf Numbers 18:1-4). Amongst that family, strict criteria further narrowed the field (cf Leviticus 21:16-24), while some persons were specifically cut off (cf Leviticus 10:1-2, 1 Samuel 2:30-36). Levites might enter into the outer courts of the Lord's house, priests into the Holy Place, but into the Holy of Holies "*went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood*" (Hebrews 9:7). Thus was demonstrated the inapproachable and discriminatory nature of Divine holiness.

The Old Testament priesthood also foreshadowed the person and work of Christ Jesus – whilst at the same time falling far short of the reality. In common with the Aaronic priests, Christ was divinely appointed, was human like those whom He served, could sympathise as a fellow-sufferer in their infirmities, and offered sacrifice for sin (cf Hebrews 5:1-5). But in a way far superior to them, He combined with His priesthood royalty, immortality, and personal perfection. He entered, not a tabernacle or temple, but Heaven itself; offering not substitutionary beasts, but His own blood; and did this, not repeatedly, but once and for all (cf Hebrews 7:13-28, 9:23-28).

The priests of that former era also typified something of the rights and privileges of the true people of God, namely, Christians. For we, like them, are authorised to draw nigh into God's presence (cf Hebrews 10:19-22), are called upon to make offerings and sacrifices (cf Romans 12:1, Hebrews 13:15, 1 Peter 2:5), and to make intercession on behalf of others (cf 1 Timothy 2:1). To those early believers, so acquainted with the limitations and prohibitions of the Levitical system, used to spiritual duties being confined to an exclusive minority, how striking and different must the New Testament message have sounded: "*ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation*" (1 Peter 2:9); to hear that Christ "*hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father*" (Revelation 1:6). This was but a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, wherein God had said: "*I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see My glory ... And I will also take of them for*

*priests and for Levites” (Isaiah 66:18, 21); “For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same My name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto My name, and a pure offering: for My name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts” (Malachi 1:11).*

However, there is one thing that the Aaronic priesthood definitively **did not**, and could not, typify – namely, the Christian ministry. Indeed, to try and force a connection between the New Testament minister and the Old Testament priest is erroneous and futile. For if on the one hand, **Christ** has fulfilled all types and shadows, and is become our Great High Priest (cf Hebrews 4:14), and on the other hand, **every believer** is henceforth invested with all the rights and privileges of priesthood – then there is simply no place left for any religious functionary, holding an intermediate position, or a titled office of ‘priest’. The very suggestion is anathema to the Scriptures. And yet, in so many particulars, the accepted practices of modern-day Christian ministry can be shown to have no foundation in the apostolic pattern, and take instead for their precedent the ‘weak and unprofitable’ systems of old (cf Hebrews 7:18). The benighting shadows of Judaism continue to cast a pall over this vital, New Testament office. Some practical examples:

### **A Ministerial ‘Career’**

Under the Levitical economy, there was a clear route to the priesthood. It was defined in Law. If a man was a descendant of the line of Aaron, and met the necessary conditions, then when he reached the prescribed age, he could enter upon the office (cf Numbers 8:24-26). It was an established system that a man could choose to follow. In consequence, some highly disreputable persons (as Eli, Hophni, Phineas, Annas and Caiaphas) served as priests, and could not very easily be prevented. As the epistle describes it, an Aaronic priest could be ‘made’, “*after the law of a carnal commandment*” – by following a process – and inevitably those laws “[make] *men high priests which have infirmity*” (Hebrews 7:16, 28), or are totally unfitted to the task. The same approach has long blighted

the Christian ministry. At former periods in British history, it was a common expectation amongst aristocratic families, that the first son would take on the duties of heir, while the second son would ‘go into the priesthood’. Or, for young men who were unequal to military service, insufficiently academic to enter university, and too proud to learn a trade, to instead consider becoming a clergyman. Whilst times have changed, attitudes have not. Many there are who think, aged 16 or 18, that they may choose the ministry for their job, and need only follow the recognised route to get there. Still others imagine that, if a young man sits a theology degree, or spends time at a seminary, and shows an aptitude for public speaking or administration, then he has all the necessary qualifications to ‘make’ him a minister, and ought not to be denied. Other denominations may have different systems, and alternative criteria: perhaps sample sermons must be preached, church approval obtained, and the itineration market entered upon until such time as a job-offer is made. What is all this, but a ‘law of a carnal commandment’, reducing a precious, spiritual office to the level of a ‘career choice’, or a ‘recruitment fair’? Where is the Holy Spirit? Where is the call of God? Where is the inward exercise of heart? The modern church has little time and less regard for these things.

The Scriptures afford examples of other characters, like Isaiah (cf Isaiah 6:5-13), or Jeremiah (cf Jeremiah 1:4-9, 20:7-9), or Paul, who could truthfully describe himself as: “*an apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead*”, and testify that, “*when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood ... and I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles*” (Galatians 1:1, 15, 16, 2:2). How different from the legal admission systems of the priesthood, was the divine calling of prophets and apostles. But it is the former way that is being replicated today, while the latter is rapidly disappearing.

## **A Secularised Ministry**

As well as prescribing the conditions for the priesthood, the Sinaitic Law gave very detailed directions about their material support. Whilst no tribal territory was assigned to Levi, there were instead 48 cities gifted to them throughout the land, with their surrounding pastures (cf Numbers 35:1-5, Joshua 21:41-42) for a permanent dwelling. In addition to this, a national system of tithes was imposed, to be rendered to the Levites (cf Numbers 18:24-26, Nehemiah 10:37-38), whilst among the many sacrifices and offerings directed in the Law were several which included a portion to be reserved for the priests' use (cf Deuteronomy 18:1-5). Needless to say, these arrangements were not above corruption and abuse (cf 1 Samuel 2:12-17, Micah 3:11, Malachi 1:6-8, 12-14). Here is the basis for systems of tithes and taxation being used in the support of religious institutions and their officers – the imposition and enforcement of which has been the source of income for some, and a source of contention for many more (as the troubled history of parochial taxes, church rates and pew rents serves to prove). How very different from this is the practice of the early church, described in the Acts of the Apostles, where the generally poor and impoverished believers collected together such things as they had, not for the enrichment of clergymen, but for the mutual support of all who were needy amongst them (cf Acts 2:44-45, 4:34-35, note – Acts 3:6); where the newly formed congregation at Philippi forwarded occasional gifts to Paul (cf Philippians 4:14-18), while those in Macedonia and Achaia voluntarily collected a donation for the saints in Jerusalem (cf Romans 15:25, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). The apostles themselves were frequently seen, labouring, as necessary, for their own support, and also for the welfare of others (cf John 21:3, Acts 18:3, 1 Corinthians 4:11-12, Acts 20:33-35). Such arrangements are scarcely to be found anywhere in the modern Christian church.

Those who wish to defend secular systems of formalised remuneration for Christian ministers frequently rush for their defence to 1 Corinthians 9, as though this portion entirely legitimised the service of mammon.

The context is vitally important. Paul's genuineness as a servant of God was being called into question, on the grounds that he did **not** 'make his living' from the ministry (vs. 1-2), and it was not his 'full time job' – even though at this time in history, the number of persons thus supported was so few that they could almost be listed by name (v. 5). He then gives examples to show that, while material return for spiritual service is permissible, it is an incongruous exchange (v. 11), and one he would sooner die than enter into (v. 15)! That this chapter has been made the justification for payouts, pension funds, properties and perquisites is evidently a gross wresting of the Scriptures. Says Peter: "*Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind*" (1 Peter 5:2). But current church order is not informed by the New Testament; it is a strange amalgam of the world and ancient Judaism.

### **Ordination Ceremonies**

The echoes of the Levitical priesthood sound never more loudly than in the rituals that have been invented in recent times for the appointment of ministers. These occasions are now invariably accompanied by large public services, the attendance of other notable 'senior' ministers, and a literal laying of hands upon the kneeling appointee. It would require only the addition of vestments and anointing oil, and the Aaronic ceremony would be essentially recreated (cf Exodus 29). The introduction of any physical rite into the practice of the church, other than those two ordinances prescribed by the Saviour, is dangerous territory indeed. What is meant to be symbolised by the imposition of hands of one minister upon another? Has the Romish lie of 'apostolic succession' been embraced by supposedly reformed churches, that this transfer of authority is needed? Or has the ability to communicate extraordinary spiritual gifts been restored (cf Acts 8:17-23)? Or is the church simply being spoiled by the 'traditions of men, and rudiments of the world' (cf Colossians 2:8) once again? The Lord's calling of His own disciples was without any pomp or circumstance: "*And He saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway*

*left their nets, and followed Him” (Matthew 4:19-20).*

### **Ministerial Superiority**

With the invented ritual of ministerial ordination comes a host of concomitant errors. Some will say that the ‘ordained’ minister now becomes worthy of a title, as ‘Pastor...’ prefixed to his name; or worse, ‘Reverend’, in a blasphemous misappropriation of a title of Deity (cf Psalm 111:9) and an outright denial of Scripture (cf Matthew 23:8-10). In some cases, there may be distinguishing forms of clothing adopted. Priestly garments there may once have been – but apostolic vestments there never were! Some go further in their elevation or veneration of the office, and claim that ‘only an ordained minister can conduct the Lord’s Table’; ‘Believer’s Baptism is only legitimate if performed by an ordained minister’; ‘only an ordained minister can pronounce a benediction’. Here is a disturbing conflation of errors, with no basis in truth. The minister is not an Old Testament priest, uniquely authorised to proclaim blessings (cf Deuteronomy 21:5) – he is a praying Christian, who may seek the good of the congregation, and himself equally. The minister does not, by his position, lend credibility to ordinances – only by personal submission and obedience to those ordinances does he have any legitimacy himself. And most certainly does he not have some exclusive role in respect of the Communion service – for he is not a priest, the Lord’s Table is not an altar, and there is no sacrifice to be made – these are all the follies of Rome.

To speak of ‘ministerial superiority’ is a contradiction in terms. The word itself conveys the meaning – it is to be ‘minor’ or ‘least’. The Saviour explains it thus: *“Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).*

R. J. Steward

## THE HIRELING MINISTRY

But is not ‘the labourer worthy of his reward’ (cf 1 Timothy 5:18)? I answer, there is no reward (by infinite degrees) comparable to an hundredfold (though with persecution) in this life, and in the world to come, eternal life, to all that deny themselves in this life, and do, and teach, and suffer for the name of the Son of God (cf Mark 10:30). More strictly and particularly I answer:

First, he that makes a trade of preaching, that makes the cure of souls, and the charge of men’s eternal welfare, a trade, a maintenance, and living, and that explicitly makes a covenant or bargain (and therefore ... ‘no longer pay, no longer pray’ ...) I am humbly confident to maintain, that the Son of God never sent such a one to be a labourer in His vineyard. Such motions spring not from the living and voluntary spring of the Holy Spirit of God, but from the artificial and worldly respects of money, maintenance, etc.

Wherein consists the making of the hireling’s explicit and implicit bargain? I answer, ‘tis explicit, express and plain, when there is a mutual declaring and agreeing, ‘for so much or so much’, in one kind or another, as the Levite agreed with Micah in the Judges. Of this sort of explicit and plain bargains by way of tithes, stipends, etc, how are our own and other nations full, and how many thousands are there of the instances of moving and removing from leaner to fatter benefices, like the former Levite, from the poor chaplainship of Micah’s family, to the more rich and eminent devotion of a tribe of Dan (cf Judges 18); just like servants hired by the year stay not when they hear of proffers of more ease and better wages.

An implicit or implied bargain or compact is when there passeth no express agreement ‘for so much or so much’, but having been brought up (as we say) to that only trade, they must make their living of it, and therefore being something convinced of the grosser way, they are

content as boat-men, porters, and the like, with some kind of intimations by word of mouth, or in course which shall amount to such a promise as this expression: 'I know your fare, your due, I will content you', etc. Trust to my courtesy – the trial of this is plain, for without such an implication or implicit promise, the hireling will not, indeed he cannot (having no other way to live on) move his lip or tongue, no more than a boat-man or porter his hand or foot.

Secondly, as to 'the labourer worthy of his reward', I answer, we find no other pattern in the Testament of Christ Jesus, but that both the converting (or apostolical) ministry, and the feeding (or pastoral) ministry, did freely serve or minister; and yet were freely supported by the saints and churches; and that not in stinted wages, tithes, stipends, salaries, etc., but with larger or lesser supplies, as the hand of the Lord was more or less extended in His weekly blessings on them.

Thirdly, when either through poverty or neglect, support and maintenance failed, yet still they eyed (as seamen and soldiers say) 'the good of the voyage, and the battle' (the common cause of the Lord Jesus) and their own hands day and night supplied their own and others' necessities (cf Acts 20:34). And this was, and will be, the only way of the labourers of the Son of God ...

Objection: Although it be granted that the hireling ministry, both explicit and implicit, is none of Christ's, yet this is wonderful: what should be the reason why so much good hath been wrought thereby, as the conversion of thousands, etc?

I answer, all the wisdom, mercy, goodness, and piety that is in us, is but a drop to the ocean of that which is in the Father of Mercies, who with infinite pity and patience, passeth by the ignorance and weaknesses of His children. Hence Luther and other monks, Cranmer and other bishops, Calvin and other presbyterians, God hath graciously covered their failings, and accepted His own grace of good desires, good affections and endeavours, though in so many ways defiled with sin.

Thus was His infinite goodness pleased to overlook the sin of polygamy, or many wives, in which so many of the fathers or patriarchs of Israel were brought forth. Thus was He pleased to pass by the sins of the high places, where Solomon himself offered sacrifice.

And yet as to this great point of good being done, we may with truth assert two things: First, where God hath been pleased to bring in one soul to Himself by the hireling ministry, many more have been brought home by the voluntary and more single preachings of some, whether public or private; by the endeavour of private Christians, by the reading of the Holy Scriptures, by godly examples, by afflictions, etc. ... Hence sure it is that there have been, and are, many excellent prophets and witnesses of Christ Jesus, who never 'entered (as they say) into the ministry', to wit, lawyers, physicians, soldiers, tradesmen, and others of higher and lower rank, who by God's Holy Spirit (breathing on their meditations of the Holy Scriptures, and other private helps) have attained and much improved an excellent Spirit of knowledge, and utterance in the holy things of Jesus Christ, which spirit they ought to cherish, and further to improve, to the praise of Christ...

But secondly, true and right prophesying and preaching, at first was, and shall be (because after God's own way and ordinance) beyond all compare with present times, gloriously and wonderfully successful. Thus in Acts 2 and 5 etc. poor sinners came mourning after a Saviour by thousands. The church and people of God since the apostacy is an army routed, and can hardly preserve and secure itself, much less subdue and conquer others; like a vessel becalmed at sea, which though it make some way by rowing and towing, yet is not comparable to what it doth when the mighty gales of God's Holy Spirit breathe (as most He useth to do) in the ways of His own most holy appointments.

Roger Williams (1603 – 1683)  
*The Hireling Ministry None of Christ's*, 1652

## EDITORIAL

How fleeting and uncertain is the ‘peace’ that is brokered by man! For the world’s understanding of peace is, that it represents only an absence of those things that are contrary to it – whether hostility, armed conflict, unrest or tribulations. By this narrow and negative definition, peace is lost as soon as these opposing forces revive or recur; peace endures only so long as all parties concerned are willing and able to maintain their part in the arrangement, and rigorously uphold the conditions to the satisfaction of all others. This is hardly productive of a peaceful frame of mind, when peace itself ‘stands in jeopardy every hour’. It is a very partial and imperfect remedy to declare: “*Peace, peace; when there is no peace*” (Jeremiah 6:14).

When the Scriptures speak of peace in a spiritual sense, it clearly means something more than the common, human definition. Indeed, Christ describes it as being ‘peace, not as the world giveth’ (cf John 14:27); it is a peace which “*passeth all understanding*” (Philippians 4:7). It is different, because it does not rely on the works or duties of fallible, fallen man; it is better because it is not subject to change and the vicissitudes of time; it is superior, because it is authoritative, and instigated and upheld entirely at the volition of one person: it is peace ‘**from** the Lord Jesus Christ’ (cf Philippians 1:2), “*through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Romans 5:1), and “*peace by Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all)*” (Acts 10:36). This is what makes all the difference. In short, “**He is our peace**, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us . . . so making peace” (Ephesians 2:14-15). And this He is able to do, for He is described as the ‘Prince’ of it (cf Isaiah 9:6). Being holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners; being without either beginning or end of days; being He who remainest, and whose years have no end; the peace He gives will be, like Himself, immutable, eternal and sure. “*Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace always by all means*” (2 Thessalonians 3:16).