

STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 5

Malachi 1:6-2:9

February 9, 2003

Review

Remember, we considered in some detail the text of this second disputation last Lord's Day evening. We considered last Sunday from this text the general point that Malachi, following many other prophets, is asserting here: viz. that the Lord has made the priesthood, the ministry of Word and Sacrament, essential to the spiritual life, health, and prosperity of his people. Because we spent so much time on the text as we read it last week, I will simply read it again without comment.

Now, several perennial issues are raised by Malachi's criticism of the priests of his day.

First, there is the question of what a minister, a priest *does*. What is his calling, what are his responsibilities, precisely? And Malachi says, as the rest of the Bible, that priests or ministers or pastors – all those terms are used interchangeably in the Bible – are to be preachers of the Word of God and superintendents of God's worship.

Malachi uses the language of Deuteronomy 33:8-11, where Moses, in blessing Levi, describes the functions of the priestly office (in v. 10):

“He teaches your precepts to Jacob and your law to Israel. He offers incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.”

This same dual responsibility, interestingly, is confirmed in the New Testament, when the apostles describe *their* ministry. Remember, they are explaining in Acts 6:4, why they cannot devote themselves to the ministry of mercy in the church in Jerusalem and so why a new office should be appointed for that purpose, the office of the deacon. The new deacons will take care of the poor and, the apostles say,

“...we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

In that context however, and given the fact that there is an article in front of the word “prayer,” we probably should read it as “The Prayer” with a capital “P” and think not of the act of praying itself but of the public worship of the church, “The Prayer.” The Anglican's call their manual of worship “The Book of Common Prayer” and that is the same use of the word “prayer” as here: Prayer as the title for the public worship of the church. It is a good title, by the way, for all our worship should be “earnest and familiar talking with God,” which is John Knox's famous definition of prayer. In any case, the apostles were saying that their proper function and their God-given responsibilities were the ancient callings of the priest: the ministry of the Word and the superintendence of the people's worship.

Now, clearly, that is Malachi's understanding of the ministerial or pastoral office. He talks about two things in this disputation. The first concerns the priests' role in public worship and how they are abusing that role by allowing God's people to offer a half-hearted, disobedient and corrupt worship. The chief example he uses is that of offering sub-standard animals for sacrifice. He also refers to the boredom of the priests in their work as superintendents of that worship. And he further refers to the priests' blessing of the people – another liturgical act of the priest, pronouncing the Lord's benediction – and how those blessings will be made ineffectual by the Lord if priests and people do not repent of their sins. He pictures them offering sacrifices and the Lord throwing the dung from the dead animals into their faces, making a mockery of their supposed ritual cleanliness because they had made a mockery of his worship.

But, in the second place, Malachi is also concerned about *what* the priests are teaching and, perhaps, *how* the priests are teaching the Word of God. We read what kind of preacher and teacher a minister ought to be in 2:6-7 and, contrarily, what sort of preachers the priests of that day were in vv. 8-9. Instead of proclaiming the whole counsel of God with faithfulness and earnestness, they were shaving the truth or denying it all together and so causing God's people to stumble. As we will gather going on in Malachi, the priests certainly were not powerfully inscribing the Word of God on the hearts of the people and helping them to believe it absolutely. What is more, they even seemed to be tailoring their message to the advantage of certain people and to the disadvantage of others. As the artful Samuel Butler described the same situation that existed in his day (the 17th century):

What makes all doctrines plain and clear?
About two hundred pounds a year.
And that which was proved true before
Proved false again? Two hundred more.

Apparently something like that was going on in Malachi's day. The ministry of the Word was being bought!

Now, both biblical history and church history throw up all manner of permutations of ministerial failure and infidelity. Sometimes, as so often in Israel's history, the priests or ministers actually taught heresy outright and confirmed heretical notions in the way in which they ordered the people's worship. The priests in the days of Jeremiah had mixed pagan idolatry with the ancient worship of the Lord, incense was being burned both to the Lord and to idols. At the same time they were teaching the theology of the Queen of Heaven, the Canaanite fertility Goddess, Astarte, *and* the special election of Israel as the chosen people of Yahweh. And, we would say the Christian ministry of the Middle Ages, in many particulars, was hardly any better, if not worse. And, when by the end of that period, the blessings of grace were actually being sold by officers of the church to a gullible public, the priestly malfeasance Malachi described in 2:9 was made to seem penny-ante by comparison.

Sometimes the problem is mostly doctrinal – on the preaching side – and the worship is left largely in proper form, as often in Episcopalian history. Sometimes the problem is more liturgical than doctrinal, as in some contemporary evangelicalism.

And, this has happened over and over again since the time of the Reformation. No church has been spared. It was in a Presbyterian Church in New York City in the 1920s that a prominent minister declared that he had never met an intelligent person who believed in the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. And nowadays a newspaper reporter can always find plenty of so-called Christian ministers to interview before Easter who will say that, of course, Jesus did not rise physically from the tomb, that there are many ways to God, and even that Christianity may not be in any number of respects as credible as some other philosophies or religions. We are well aware that the worst damage to be done to the Christian Church and to the faith and life of Christians has never been done from the outside, but always from the inside. Times without number the church has been brought low by priests and ministers who betrayed her, who let the enemy in and assisted him in subverting the faith of God's people.

On the other hand, the progress of the gospel in the world, the renewal and reformation of the church, the prosperity of God's people have always gone hand in hand with faithful preaching and right worship.

Geneva was a wicked city before the Reformation, so lawless that the city fathers, who were not particularly spiritual men, wanted to clean it up. They were "family values" types. Protestantism was changing other cities, but Luther was already occupied. They turned to a skinny, little scholar. All Calvin had was the Bible. No political power, no money, no influence. And after his first period of ministry and his exile to Strasbourg, he was already once a failure. The story goes that when he was called back to Geneva, he picked up in his course of preaching right where he had left off when driven out of the city. And that preaching changed the town. And not the preaching only, but the reformation of the church's worship which Calvin rightly understood to go hand in hand with sound doctrine.

All the great forward movements of the church's history have occurred in and through the revitalization of the ministry. The church has advanced on the back of her ministry. Why, we remember those great movements by the names of the ministers who were their agents! We study them as the history of their ministries whether we are talking about Athanasius and the defense of Jesus as the Son of God in the 4th century, or Augustine and his defense of salvation by grace in the 5th century, or Luther and the Reformation in the 16th century, or Wesley, Whitefield, and Edwards and the Great Awakening in the 18th century, or Carey and Livingstone and the missionary movement of the 19th century.

This should not surprise us, of course. The Lord has made his people to depend upon his Word. It is a life-giving force in their lives. It is both milk and meat, as the Bible says. It nourishes and strengthens life. And, in the same way, the Lord has made his people to depend upon worship, upon that most powerful experience of communion with him that has appointed for them weekly. Over and over again in the Bible that worship is said to be or shown to be the engine of the Christian life. It is in God's house that the Lord meets with his people and communicates his love, his presence, and his truth to them and impresses those things on their hearts. No wonder then that the faithful ministry of the priest becomes so crucial to the well-being of the church: the priest or minister is responsible for those principal means by which the Lord communicates himself and his grace to his people. If ministers faithfully discharge those two responsibilities, the channels of God's grace are open and flowing free. If ministers, however, are unfaithful and

disobedient, those channels are diverted or dammed up and the grace of God does not reach the people. That is why the Lord regards ministerial sin as so contemptible and so dangerous.

But Malachi raises a second matter. Besides what a minister *does* there is the question of *his own life and reputation*. Here, in vv. 6 and 7, Malachi says that a faithful minister turns many from sin, communicates the knowledge and the instruction of the Lord. And he does this, Malachi says, because *he himself walks with the Lord*. He preaches out of his own experience of the Lord and his life is a recommendation of his doctrine. Augustine said, “What I live by, I impart.” And every faithful minister knows the truth of that. It is as obvious as can be that in many cases the minister or priest has nothing to communicate to the church because he has himself no knowledge of the way of salvation or the love of God. Faithfulness of life and faithfulness of office have always gone together and always will. It is no accident that the biography of the Christian ministry is, to a very great degree, the biography of Christian sainthood. Most of the great believers of Christian history have been ministers. I don’t mean that they were greater believers than any number of lay men and women, I only mean that the prominent figures of Christian history, those whose lives would be better known and of whose work there would be a record, were more often ministers. But what I am saying is that these men are as well known as saints as they are as preachers. And that is true whether we are talking of Chrysostom and Augustine or Bernard of Clairvaux or Luther and Calvin or Latimer and Ridley or Wesley and Whitefield and Edwards or Spurgeon and Alexander Whyte. In many different ways, the history of the church is the history of her great men and these men were both great Christians and great ministers. And in a lesser way that is true of individual congregations as well. Godly men have made the most faithful and successful ministers. The churches have prospered under faithful ministers and suffered under the unfaithful or less faithful.

Now, if all of this is true, and the Bible says it is a hundred times and church history confirms it a thousand times, then the matter of the church’s ministry becomes of the greatest practical importance to every Christian. If you love your children you will want them to sit under faithful, powerful, life-changing preaching all their lives and you will want them to worship, Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day, in that way that best conveys to and adorns in their hearts the presence of God, the wonder of his grace, and the majesty of his rule.

But there are two forces abroad in our day that, in my judgment, pose a real danger to such a faithful, fruitful Christian ministry.

1. One is the *professionalizing and psychologizing of the ministry*. The simple fact is that both ministers and congregations expect different things from their ministers than was historically the case. Nowadays the Christian minister is often a combination of CEO, psychologist, marketing expert, and pastor, or, at least, he is expected to be. One of the great differences between the modern minister and the historic conception of the minister is that the pastors of the present day have a thousand things to do. Their energies are scattered over a wide field. The energies of the best models of Christian ministry from the past were concentrated on but one thing. Modern ministers try to do many things; the faithful ministers of the past tried to do just one thing, and that one thing was preaching. We might well have said that many of them should have done more with worship, but there is no mistaking their single minded concentration on the study and the preaching of the Bible.

When someone described John Wesley as *homo unius libri*, a man of one book, he was describing him *as a minister*. Are you aware of this: there are quite a number of pulpit ministers in American Reformed and evangelical churches nowadays, including our own PCA, who preach no more than 40 sermons a year. He has no evening service, and so does not prepare a second sermon for Sunday, and on the odd Sunday he is on vacation or another man is preaching for him. The great preachers of the Christian past and the faithful parish ministers beside them preached at least twice on the Lord's Day and often in the middle of the week. They were preachers of the Word first and last. They prepared to preach and they preached. That is what they thought their calling to be and their congregations agreed.

But, nowadays, the minister is many other things. He is the builder of the church as an institution, a ministry, a set of programs. He is the CEO of what is sometimes quite a substantial business. He is a counselor in the more modern sense – faithful pastors have always been *confidants* and spiritual directors to their people, but as experts in the Bible and human life not as psychologists in the modern professional sense. He is responsible for leadership development, for the initiation of programs that will make the church grow and extend its influence and ministry. He may well be a fund raiser. And, of course, he preaches and teaches. He may or may not have much of anything to do with the worship of the church. In the day of worship committees and very simple liturgies, sometimes the minister preaches the sermon and does nothing else in the service.

This is how ministers nowadays often think of themselves and this is what congregations nowadays are often looking for. You ought to see some of the job descriptions for ministers that cross my desk from time to time. It is not Moses' job description or Malachi's. It is the modern American minister who is being sought, who does many other things than preach and teach the word and superintend the worship of God's house. And, of course, it shows. So much that passes for preaching today is only the palest shadow of the proclamation of the Word of God that once filled the pulpits of Christian churches.

It is a fair question, in my view, whether the church will prosper when its ministers are not paying their full attention to the work God has actually called them to and when, consequently, the two great instruments of his blessing – Word and Worship – are not being wielded in faithfulness and with the intended effect. The other things are the world's things, by and large. They are not anything God tells us he will use to bless his people and build his church. We will be better off when the ministry returns to a priestly view of its calling and character, that is a biblical view, and abandons the professional view that has become too common in our day. One proof, by the way, of the modern professionalism of the ministry is how often ministers now move. Obviously the easiest path to career advancement is to move. But neither Moses nor Malachi are interested in a minister's career!

2. The second set of forces abroad in our day that have a powerful influence on the ministry, and I fear for the worse, is that of *the Reformed doctrine of calling* as it is mixed with *Western democratic egalitarianism*.

We don't hesitate to say that everyone has a calling from God and that everyone has a calling to fulfill in the world, whatever his or her job or life circumstance. The Reformed teaching is certainly right that all of life is sacred and that there is no part of life that is "secular" in the ordinary sense of the term. A lawyer, a doctor, a salesman, a homemaker, a teacher, a nurse, an office-worker, a landscaper, a builder, each has a calling from the Lord and each is to fulfill his calling as unto the Lord. There are no secular callings, only sacred ones. The Lord is to be served in everything human beings do. That is right.

However, that can be taken to mean that all occupations are the same and that no calling is more important than any other. When I was at the Free University in Amsterdam in 1984, a bastion of Reformed/Calvinistic thinking, though by that time in steep spiritual decline, it was clear that they understood the Reformed doctrines of calling and of common grace to mean that a politician or a labor-organizer was advancing the kingdom of God just as much as a minister. And when you add to that kind of thinking the egalitarianism of our culture, the powerful prejudice against the notion that anyone stands above anyone else, that anyone must be subject to or depend upon anyone else, you are in a fair way of diminishing the ministry in the eyes of the church. You are making smaller what the Bible makes very great. You are making relatively less important what the Bible says is all important.

The ministry is not simply one among many occupations in the Bible. Of no other occupation is it ever said, as it is said in the Bible explicitly and then in many instances implicitly, that ministers *save* their hearers. (Notice by the way that that is precisely what Paul says: faithful ministers save *their hearers*; he is thinking of ministers there in 1 Timothy 4, as preachers of the Word.) And, in effect, that is what Malachi is saying here in other words. The people of God depend upon their ministers to bring them the gospel, to write upon their hearts first the law of God and then his grace and salvation, and then to direct them in their living for the Lord. There is no other work in the world that so directly impinges on the salvation of souls.

But, nowadays, even ministers are reticent to assert their authority and the importance of their ministry. It sounds undemocratic, elitist, authoritarian. And so they wear before the church a shirt with an open collar and "share" with their people instead of preaching to them. Whatever this is, it is not the biblical ministry, which God has set above and before his people as his own voice among them and to them. This modern minister is not before his people what Malachi says he is, the messenger of the Lord Almighty!

For these reasons all Christians should feel an immediate and intimate interest in the Christian ministry. If you care about the Bible as the Word of God you should care about how it is preached and taught. If you care about the worship of God as the engine of Christian living, it should be a matter of the deepest interest to you that this worship is being superintended wisely, faithfully, and capably.

You should care about the training of ministers because the church your children attend will be served by the graduates of those seminaries. Your children will prosper or not in large part according to what sort of ministry they receive.

If you are the parents of sons, you should often think about whether the Lord should call your boys to the ministry and you should care that they and other young men are receiving the sort of spiritual nurture and intellectual education that will fit them for the work should God so call them. By the time he calls them, it may very well be too late to form in them some of the habits of mind and heart that would make them most effective as ministers of the Word and directors of God's Worship. I know my ministry has been diminished in important ways by the education I received, or, better, did not receive when I was young.

And you young men before me. There are many things you might do with your life. And, as God directs you, there may be many ways besides the ministry in which you may spend your life and in which you may serve the Lord. But there is no work to which you might devote yourself more crucial to the outcome of human life in this world, more vital to the interests of the kingdom of God, more essential to the salvation and eternal life of human beings, than the Christian priesthood or ministry. It is not an occupation in which you will get rich except in the wealth that comes from the approval of God and the appreciation of the best human beings. It is not an easy occupation. It requires the fullest exercise of all your powers, it is a position on the front lines of the battle and the bullets come from both the front and the rear. It is an occupation that nowadays no longer has the cachet or prestige it once did in Western culture. But it is no less essential to the plan and the purpose of God.

It has always been so; it always will be. So no Christian young man should think of the future without thinking very hard about whether the Lord wants him to be one of his priests, his ministers. God had only one son, and he made him a minister!