

Towards a Secularized Ministry

"Towards a Secularized Ministry" is an address delivered on December 12, 1990 by Dr. George Johnston at a dinner celebrating the Jubilee anniversary of his ordination to Christian ministry.

I don't know where to begin on an occasion like this. For I am only fifty years young as a minister in the Kirk of God and really I have no experience of jubilees. At the very least I have to say thank-you to all who have brought this occasion to pass. I am surprised and very grateful.

Perhaps I should tell you a story that is relevant to a Seminary. Two Glasgow kids were playing with mud by the road-side near the Barony Kirk one day, when the Barony minister came along. He asked them what they were doing: "We're making a kirk," they told him. "And there's the pulpit!" "But where is the Minister?" he said. "Oh, we havena enough dirt to make a meenister."

My seminary was not far distant from the Barony, and there ministers were made on conventional lines: plenty of scholarship and very little about the practical duties and techniques of our craft. So you won't be surprised if I confess to having been, from 1940 to 1967, pretty much a conventional type, first a Presbyterian and then a Canadian. There were perhaps flashes of nonconformity. For one thing I did most of my parish work on a bicycle, wearing a collar and tie but no shovel hat suitable for the clergy. Of course, at Communion I had to wear a silk hat ("a tile hat" we called it); a silk clerical front (it was backless); a frock coat, black pants, and the usual white clerical collar. I even got married in that outfit; but I have long since abandoned it.

It is not my intention to produce an autobiography of my past; but I would like just to repeat what I wrote in

our Parish magazine when I left in July, 1947. I had been trying to do the following:

(1) To bring you with myself into a fuller sense of the *wonder* of the church of God; the church that must live by evangelism in the one world that is a world at war, open or undeclared; (2) to let the prophetic Word of God sound out through the exposition of the Scriptures, however uncomfortable it might be; (3) to use all the knowledge and devotion of the most recent scholarship to enrich our understanding of the Bible as the supreme Rule of faith and life; (4) to show that preaching in this day cannot refuse to make pronouncements on the public life of this and every nation, be it economic or political; (5) to find ways for worship to become more truly an offering of the whole Congregation; and especially to make the second service of such a type that many would delight to attend; (6) to teach the young people the master principles of the faith, drawing them into worth-while activities of thought and service, and encouraging them to take a full place in the whole life of the church; (7) to care for the sick and the old, but to bring ordinary members into that work of visitation; to know you all and help you in any time of need to encourage the growth of friendliness to the stranger and a family loyalty among ourselves; (8) and in all these things to grow with you in a truer devotion to the holy and blessed God, the eternal Trinity, to whom belong the issues of life and death.

During the years in school and parish I had become a scholar-minister, for better or worse, and clean contrary to my expectation when I answered the call at the age of twenty. Graduate theological education in three univer-

sities — in Scotland, Germany and England — is good for making professors. Not so good, one suspects, for making prophets. And the church needs prophets, even in 1991. My career took me into universities forty-three years ago, but it included two stints in the formation of two new United Church of Canada pastoral charges. I have never ceased to enjoy preaching and the vocation of helping to train preachers. In that connexion I recall that it has been judged that in the eighteenth-century sermons could be grouped into three classes: the dull, the duller, and the inconceivably dull. I regret to have to say that preachers are often not nearly so interesting as they need to be if new generations are to be won for Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

In 1967, influenced directly by J.C. Hoekendijk of New York, and indirectly by feminists like Rosemary Radford Ruether — and my wife — I changed my style and became something of a revolutionary and gadfly, frequently in Union discussions with Anglicans and Disciples. Tom Edmonds and I used to say that we hoped to see U.T.C. graduate some really bright revolutionaries into the ministry.

But tonight, when we should look forward, I want to go even farther. My new thought for this Occasion has to be built on a text, of course. It is part of John 3:16, "God so loved the world . . ." That means: *God is a secularist*. This world of women, men, boys and girls, is his. He delights in its space and times. But it is also a naughty world that calls for renewal and redemption. To fulfil his redemptive and renewing work God's Spirit had to be embodied within this world, born into a working-class home in Galilee. In short, *the Spirit was secularized*. For his role, Jesus, the Servant and embodiment of the Spirit, became preacher, teacher, and healer, and he was identified with the homeless, the sick and the outcasts. Not for him the accoutrements of a holy man in Israel, as listed in Leviticus 8: the tunic, sash, robe and decorated waist-band. Breastpiece, turban, gold ornament and a holy crown —

and his head anointed with oil. Some of us here are clergy-persons; he wasn't! Some of us are even Doctors of Divinity: but about such people one cleaning lady told a visitor seeking her clerical employer: "Aye, but he's not the kind of doctor who does anybody any good!"

I propose that Jesus be the ideal of the minister for the centuries to come. Churches and clergy should define for their life the priorities by which they are to serve God. Yes, to preach good news. Yes, to teach the truths about God. Yes, to be part of healing processes. Yes, to encourage the spiritual talents of every church member. And in my view they may well do this without benefit of sanctified uniforms and possibly of temples and sacred edifices that cost too much in upkeep. *Churches and clergy need to be secularized, like God.*

In the liturgy of some denominations the Bible is very HOLY. You see it incensed and processed with impressive solemnity, set apart from ordinary literature by what Norrie Frye calls "words with power." For today's youth and for the entire population the Bible needs a colloquial translation, with a down-to-earth commentary. Let it be unwrapped like Lazarus and spring to new life and new relevance.

Relevant to what? To the education of the young in responsible Christian education. To the rescue of the planet from everything that threatens ecological disaster. To the real emancipation of women and girls in a saner society where feminism does not knock reason out of the heads of violent men. To a more law-abiding world where peace has become a goal to which nations and individuals are really committed. To giving everyone a fair shake financially, whilst we admire and assist each precious individual.

Secularized, you ask? Yes, but only *if people like us are willing to be inspired*. Many of you know that, as a scholar-theologian, I hold that God's own Holy Spirit too has always to be secularized. That is, ordinary folk can become *paracletes* by the service we render, by the love we

throw around, by the face we show to others. When I have someone on my mind — often it's a student — I pace the sidewalk to McGill praying that for that person God will — not work miracles — will provide a *paraclete* or even *paracletes*: to stand by; to say a good word in season; to guide and bless; and no doubt to hug.

It's the sort of ministry being done by nurses, doctors and chaplains in palliative care and similar units; by good social workers, teachers, physicians, counsellors and even some politicians. But let me add that we still need specially trained and qualified persons whom we ordain as ministers, who have the awful responsibility of serving an institution while being at the same time constantly in rebellion against all institutionalism. I am looking for more rebels with a cause. For everyone there are two prerequisites: (1) wanting to be inspired; (2) being always related to the one Master, Jesus the Christ.

When I was young there was a well-known and distinguished minister in Glasgow Cathedral. In church one Sunday he prayed: "God, in whose hand is the King of Hearts," no doubt because in his happy secular life he played a lot of Bridge. He had meant to pray: "God, in whose hands are the hearts of kings!"

I am saying now, after fifty years, that secularization is God's plan for ministry. And I mean what I say.