

The critical comma and the coming crisis

With a generation of preachers heading for retirement **Colin Wilson** compares Biblical and traditional models of 'ministry' in the western Church

*'Here's the deal:
I speak
and you
listen'*



PHOTO: PA

Within the church in the West many preachers, teachers and pastors are approaching retirement age. And a critical comma inserted by 16th-century Bible translators is now leaving the body of Christ with both a problem and an opportunity in its task of teaching, discipleship and reaching the lost with the Gospel.

'Eats Shoots & Leaves' is a book on the subject of punctuation. The title derives from an imaginary incident whereby a giant panda, having eaten a meal in a restaurant, pulls out a gun and blasts a couple of rounds into the ceiling. Before leaving the diner, the bear is asked by a confused and alarmed waiter to explain his actions. The panda responds by chucking a badly-punctuated dictionary at the puzzled man with the instruction to look up the definition of the species. On so doing, the waiter finds the relevant listing states: 'Panda. Large black-and-white bear-like mammal, native to China. Eats, shoots and leaves.' So the gun-toting animal's excuse was that he was just conforming to type. Of course the point humorously being made was that the wrongful inclusion of a comma in the second sentence radically altered the meaning. (Go on, read it again.) And in the Bible, we find the same dynamic can apply: the insertion (or not) of a comma can fundamentally change the meaning of a passage.

So the comma counts

Take for instance the words spoken to the penitent thief who was being crucified and asked the Saviour of the world: 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.'¹ In response Jesus assured him: 'I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'² However, there seems to be a problem. The Bible elsewhere tells us that the

death and subsequent resurrection of the Saviour would conform to the pattern of Jonah who spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale.³ And Peter's first letter suggests that Jesus did not go immediately to paradise.⁴ In fact a respected creed of the early church states concerning Jesus: 'He descended into hell.'⁵ And Calvin stated regarding this doctrine: 'We ought not to omit his descent into hell, a matter of no small moment in bringing about redemption.'⁶ So how can we reconcile these views with Jesus' promise to the crucified criminal that they would together share a place in paradise that

72 hours later.⁸ But the common view is that He arose on Sunday morning. This view is substantially based on the verse (contained only in some later manuscripts): 'When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, [comma] he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons.'⁹ The first part of the sentence (as it has been translated) is indeed suggesting a dawn resurrection. However again we need to look at the translators' punctuation. This time, if we were to move the comma to an early point in the sentence we would now have: 'When Jesus rose, early on the first day of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene...' This would again reconcile the apparent discrepancy relating to the comparison with Jonah by separating (in time) Jesus' resurrection (which could have taken place several hours earlier) from His first appearing to Mary.

I wouldn't want to be at all dogmatic about these things, but these illustrations help to stress the point that punctuation is a vital matter in terms of accurate communication and understanding.

**The
Shield**



Psalm 3: 3

*So the five-fold
giftings are
bestowed ... for
the... equipping
of the whole
body*

same day? The answer could be in the comma. By moving the punctuation mark one word to the right, the sentence would become: 'I tell you the truth today, you will be with me in paradise.' The telling of the truth (on the cross) and Jesus' ascension into paradise could then become separated by a period of time. Three days?

Another example of the importance of punctuation concerns the timing of Jesus' resurrection. Again we refer to the analogy with Jonah and the latter's 'three days and three nights'. If Jesus was crucified at 3.00pm⁷ then he would have risen at the same time of day,

A critical and confused doctrine

And it is at this point that King James's Bible translators would seem to have been influenced by their own theological framework and church tradition when engaged on their work. And by 'reading into' (*eisegesis*) the Word rather than reading out from it (*exegesis*) have perhaps delivered a particular false notion relating to the sphere and purposes of 'ministry' within the body. As a consequence, this has been to the great detriment of 'body building' throughout the ages and up to our present time.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus the

apostle Paul (according to the King James Version) writes: 'And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; **for the perfecting of the saints,[comma] for the work of the ministry,[comma] for the edifying of the body of Christ.**¹⁰ So from this reading we understand that the five-fold ministries (so-called) are for these three complementary but also separate and distinct purposes.

However, in the same passage in the NIV we find: 'It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, **to prepare God's people [no comma] for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.**¹¹ Or similarly in the New American Standard: 'And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints [no comma] for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.¹² The point of all of this is that the function of the five-fold ministries is not for a limited number to do it all themselves, but rather to employ these giftings and callings to equip the body of Christ so that each believer can exercise his or her ministry (and build up the whole body accordingly).

Whole body ministry

The underlying theological framework behind the translators was that 'ministry' (and they also inserted the definite article in the KJV to make it *the* ministry) was that some are called to serve but others are not. And this, allied to the fact that the 'ministry of word and sacrament'¹³ is a human invention, has effectively created an unbiblical clergy/laity distinction which denies the priesthood of all believers and relegates the majority to that of passive or, at best, minor roles.

Earlier in the same chapter in Ephesians Paul writes that Christ 'gave gifts to men'¹⁴. The word translated 'men' is the Greek word *anthropos* (from which we get our word 'anthropology') and as such the gifts are essentially to humankind rather than, in a gender-specific fashion to (some) individuals. Accordingly the 'five-fold ministries' are channels through which the gifts are bestowed and distributed amongst the whole body for the benefit of the whole body by the equipping of the whole body for all-member ministry roles in the priesthood of all believers.

Rightly rebuked and wrongly relegated

To become mature and exercise the gifting and abilities which God has given to each and every believer is a responsibility which

every child of God carries. Indeed the writer to the Hebrews scolds his readers for their immaturity and lack of spiritual growth: 'In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!'¹⁵

And the system which has been created down through the centuries and reinforced by the Reformers has perpetuated the Old Testament model of priest and temple. The



...the whole body of Christ needs to take up the baton of ministry

word 'ministry' in truth relates to roles of support and providing a service to others. It is not a badge of rank or an 'office'; the word is more a verb than a noun. And, getting back to the KJV and the use of the definite article, it is meaningless to talk about *the* ministry: 'a ministry' (singular, indefinite; of one sort or another) or 'ministries' (plural) is the correct understanding.

And yet in articulating these things we run up against a whole system which is, in



In the priesthood of all believers, all-member ministry is a team game

practice, contrary to (this aspect of) the word of God. It was as a challenge to this traditional mindset the late David Watson (of St. Michael le Belfry, York) used to cite a little rhyme: 'The vicar is late, he's forgotten the date, so what are the people to do – poor things? They'll sit in the pew with nothing to do, but sing a selection of hymns – poor things.'

The rhyme highlights the woeful passivity and dependency which church structures and 'ministry' models have created. Our calling is in Christ, our giftings are from God,

and the mandate to the whole body of believers is crystal clear: 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.'¹⁶

And we see the spirit behind this call in the words of Charles Wesley's well-known hymn:

*Soldiers of Christ, arise, and put your armour on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
through His eternal Son.
Strong in the Lord of hosts, and in His mighty
power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than
conqueror.*

Called, gifted, commissioned and assured

The privileges of knowing Christ are immeasurable, but the responsibilities are also very great. The Saviour's teaching on the parable of the talents reminds us that there are punishments to be shunned¹⁷ and rewards to be won.¹⁸

So today, as the post-war baby-boom generation of leaders approaches retirement, the whole body of Christ needs to take up the baton of ministry (in the most comprehensive and universal sense of the word). If we are to see a church energised for the saving of souls to God's glory, then each and every believer needs to be functioning in the particular and individual callings and gifting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as affirmed by the wider body in the life of each and every believer. In this situation, the word 'vacant' might refer to parking spaces, apartments, expressions or job situations, but never to churches when any one generation of preachers moves on. And whilst Christ calls every disciple to the Great Commission; He immediately followed the call with the tremendous promise and inspiration: 'And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'¹⁹

1 Luke 23:42 (NIV)

2 Luke 23:43 (NIV)

3 Matthew 12:39-40

4 1 Peter 3:19

5 The Apostle's Creed

6 John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion

7 Matthew 26:46-50

8 The 'crucified

Friday/resurrected

Sunday' scenario does

not sit comfortably with

the chronology of the

Passover (aka Passion)

week or the 'sign of

Jonah', but the argu-

ments supporting a full

three days between cru-

cifixion and resurrection

are beyond the scope of

this article. cf.

Christopher Hill: *Christ Our Passover*

9 Mark 16:9

10 Ephesians 4:11,12 (KJV)

11 Ephesians 4:11,12 (NIV)

12 Ephesians 4:11,12 (NASB)

13 John Calvin: Summary of Doctrine concerning Ministry of the Word and Sacraments

14 Ephesians 4:8b

15 Hebrews 5:12

16 Matthew 28:19a

17 Matthew 25:30

18 Matthew 25:31-46

19 Matthew 28:20b