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**A SHEPHERDESS OF  
SHEEP.**

By

**DOROTHEA BELFIELD.**

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P **PAMPHLET**

**Society for the Ministry of Women  
(Interdenominational).**

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# A SHEPHERDESS OF SHEEP.

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"She walks, the lady of my delight,  
A shepherdess of sheep."

*Alice Meynel.*

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## I.

WHATEVER may be thought of the conclusions of the Archbishops' Commission on the Ministry of Women—and they seem to have shared the fate of most things which are based upon the expediency of the moment and to have pleased no-one—its Report has at least helped to direct public attention to a new development in the spiritual needs and desires of the community. Nowhere is this development more apparent than among the younger women of the upper and middle classes. Conventionalities have lost their restraining power; the old, fixed standards of conduct have disappeared; and to a large extent the sheltered leisure of earlier generations has given place to the manifold interests of the professions, or the strain of a daily struggle for existence in the business world. For many the simpler diversions of the past have been displaced by a variety of amusements, or lost sight of altogether in a feverish search for excitement or fresh sensations. The highly trained and independent women of to-day are accustomed to adopt a critical attitude towards the dictates of authority, and in religious matters, especially, they too often disdain

to seek help from those whom they assume to be mere traditionalists or mediocrities. Everywhere there is a new freedom, new hope, new danger. Emancipation has brought to light more virtues than some critics are willing to allow; but it has opened up new possibilities of moral and spiritual disaster.

The need is great for women who can give to women the wise and understanding guidance of their own sex which is available from men to men. It is beside the mark to answer that in the past much has been done in this respect by unofficial counsel and direction, or that many women have received help from men in the sacramental ministry of reconciliation, to the great advantage of their souls. There will always be some who will desire no other aid; but to many thoughtful observers it is becoming clear that the time has come for the removal of all sex restrictions within the Ministry of the Church if the needs of the community as a whole are to be adequately met.

It seems evident from the tone of the discussions in Convocation and elsewhere that many of the clergy are still unaware of the outstanding qualifications of some of the women teachers of theology, or the value of the application of their pastoral gifts to the needs of modern society. On the other hand, women who are accustomed to mix on equal terms with men in business and professional life, or in social activities, are little able to understand the opposition to developments which appear to them mere matters of justice and common-sense. In the light of their own experience they recognise sex distinctions as artificial, and are impatient of the restrictions which are now only, or chiefly, imposed upon the work of women when it is undertaken in connection with the Church.

During the last century, three separate vocations for women have appeared or re-appeared within the Anglican Communion: Lay Work, with its special bias towards social service; the Religious Life, technically so called; and an Ordained Ministry which, until comparatively recent years, has sought and found its only expression in the Order of Deaconesses. To-day, slowly but surely, a new vocation is making itself felt and will not be denied. A generation of essentially "parish workers" is passing into a generation of potential "women ministers," whose call is to the wider opportunities and heavier responsibility of the priesthood. The change strikes deeply at custom and tradition. Some view it with doubt and apprehension; others with a flat repudiation: but it is a timid faith that dares not recognise Divine activity in unfamiliar ways. If it be true that in a very real sense to-day the old order is changing, surely we may believe that God is once again fulfilling Himself in that which is new?

## II.

It is a curious phenomenon in an age of change and re-construction to find many people still clinging uncompromisingly to a primitive tradition in matters of religion. It seems to be often unrecognised that, whereas vocation itself is an unchanging factor in the relations between God and the individual soul, the expression of that vocation varies with time and place and the needs of successive generations. Again and again in history the need of a church or of a nation has been the opportunity for some movement which has made a lasting contribution to its welfare. Is it merely an accident that the need to-day for a fresh and vigorous presentation of the eternal truths of Christianity should coincide with the development in women of powers of thought and action, undreamed of less than a century ago?

In one of the earliest documents of the Christian Church (\*) a principle is laid down which is still in process of being translated into practice. The idea of racial equality, startling enough to the mind of the first century, is nearing its fulfillment with the admission, not merely of Jews and Greeks, but of the coloured races also, to the Christian ministry. The reproach of slavery has disappeared, at any rate within the countries under British dominion. The place accorded to women in the Primitive Church was a revolution in the accepted conception of their position in the world, and their place in modern society is the natural outcome of that change. It is time for the life of the Church to be similarly enriched. In many quarters there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction with a Church which continues to lag behind secular institutions in giving effect to the pre-eminently Christian doctrine of the equality of the sexes. The restriction of the Liturgical Ministry to men is felt to be archaic, and its results are far-reaching and often disabling. Many women who have no desire to enter the priesthood themselves are estranged by the knowledge that it would be impossible for them to do so in any case. For some the representative character of the Eucharist is marred by the ministrations of men alone; the Sacrament of Penance is spoiled, or made impossible for them, by what they feel to be the cruel injustice of requiring from women only the stripping away of the deepest personal reticences before a member of the opposite sex. If the authority of the priestly office were given equally to men and women, many a difficult problem could be wisely solved. It would compel no-one to make use of women's ministry who did not desire to do so; but it would open a new channel of hope and comfort to many a troubled soul.

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(\*) A.D. 49. Gal. iii. 28.

Apart from this feeling of dissatisfaction in the minds of many modern women at the restriction of their opportunities for giving or receiving spiritual aid, the general pastoral care of the community is suffering through the inequality in status between the sexes. It is becoming usual for deaconesses, or trained lay-workers, to be entrusted with a large part of the pastoral work in the parishes; visiting, teaching, and individual help and counsel. The benefit in many cases is great; nevertheless, the delegation of one part of the ministerial charge to persons who occupy a position of recognised ecclesiastical inferiority, does inevitably rob it of much of its dignity and power. There was no distinction in the mind of the later Isaiah between the feeding of the flock and its care and guidance; but in the Church of to-day there is a great gulf fixed, and a clear distinction in values, between the women, ordained or otherwise, who minister to the pastoral needs of the people, and the men who alone may feed them with the Bread of Life.

Again, the growing practice of allowing women with an episcopal licence to speak and teach in church has, under existing conditions and in spite of its manifest advantages, the same unfortunate result, in that it gives to the ministry of the Word a subordination to the ministry of the Sacraments for which there is no sanction in either Bible or Prayer Book. It may be true, as some would claim, that the distinction in function is justified in practice, and that the contribution of women is pre-eminently pastoral and educational in character. Even so, the need for an equality in status remains unaltered; its bestowal would not preclude an intelligent adjustment of the work in accordance with the special gifts of those concerned and the requirements of a particular situation. It is probable, however, that the differentiation is more a matter of individual

qualifications than of any arbitrary distinction of sex. When prejudice and long-standing tradition are set aside, and the whole question is seen in the light of the Gospel revelation of the all-embracing activities of the Divine Word, is it reasonable to hold that He who was once manifested to the World in human form, born of a woman, could be dishonoured to-day by the bestowal of His sacramental presence upon His people through the Ordered Ministry of Women? It is not competition, but the desire for co-operative thought and action which is at the heart of this matter; it is not feminism, but a deep sense of vocation in the Church of God which is its driving power. If in the spiritual, as in the physical world, the sexes are but complementary, one to the other, it may well be that there are elements in the sacramental ministry itself which still await the contribution of woman's mind and spirit to attain perfection of expression.

The need was never greater than it is to-day for a closer co-ordination of both priest and pastor in the ministerial office. Maybe it waits for the part which women have to play, as yet undreamed of in our Church philosophy. It is the human race for which Christ died and triumphed; it is humanity itself which forms his flock: and since it is made up of men and women it is fitting that both men and women should minister to its needs, and offer up its thankfulness and praise. In the Heavenly Places there is neither male nor female. We look for that principle in action in the Church of Christ on earth: the man and woman priest before the altar; the shepherd and the shepherdess of souls; co-workers in the pastorate of God.

## SOCIETY FOR THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN.

(INTERDENOMINATIONAL.)

AIM.—To attain the ideal that in the ministry of the Church of Christ no distinction should be made between men and women.

With this object to work for—

- (1) Equal opportunity in training and service for women ministers in those Churches in which the principle of equality is already recognised;
- (2) The full ordination of women in those Churches which do not at present grant it: or in the case of those Churches which do not use the word "ordination," its exact equivalent.

MEMBERSHIP.—All persons of 18 years of age and upwards calling themselves Christians, who are in agreement with the above object and who pay an annual subscription of 1/- or more, are eligible for membership of the Society. Members are asked to subscribe according to their means, it being understood that 2/6 is the minimum subscription that really covers the cost of their membership of the Society. All members receive the quarterly news-sheet, "The Coming Ministry."

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