

The Ministry: A Microcosm of the Christian Life

Written by Michael Gowens

Wednesday, 13 July 2011 08:20 - Last Updated Wednesday, 13 July 2011 08:26

"But be thou an example of the believers..." 1Ti 4:12 "In all things showing thyself a pattern of good works..." Tit 2:7

When the Lord Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father, He conferred gifts of public ministry upon men. {Eph 4:8} He made some men apostles. Others He made prophets. To some, He gave the gift of evangelism. Still others, He equipped to be pastor/teachers. {Eph 4:11} The four types or classifications of gifts are similar in terms of the fact that each is concerned with the public ministry of God's word. They differ, however, in the sense that the first two, i.e. apostles and prophets, were "foundational" {Eph 2:20} and temporary, though the last two, i.e. evangelist and pastor/teacher, were intended to be ordinary and perpetual in all ages of the church. Why did Jesus give gifts of the public ministry of the word to men? Eph 4:12 specifies three reasons: (1) The Perfecting of the Saints- Preaching is intended to facilitate spiritual growth and maturity among believers; (2) The Work of the Ministry- Preaching is intended to equip the saints for ministry; (3) The Edifying of the Body of Christ- Preaching is the means God has chosen to encourage, affirm, and build up the church. Notice again the second item above. The public ministry of the word was given, says Paul, for the work of the ministry. Is this a redundancy? Has Paul fallen into the trap of circular reasoning? Is he saying that preachers have been given to the church so that they can preach? No, that is obvious. Everyone understands that preachers are supposed to preach. Rather Paul is saying that gifts of public ministry have been given for the purpose of equipping the saints for their ministry. It would not be wrong to read verse twelve, "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the saints' ministry..." Preaching, in other words, is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. A Biblical sermon aims at the mobilization of every believer in true Christian ministry. How many ministers do you have in your church? The answer to that question should be equivalent to the number of names on the church roll. The rediscovery of the Biblical emphasis on every member ministry in the Body of Christ is, in my opinion, one of the most positive dimensions of church life in recent years.

The Modern Mood Toward "Ministry"

Unfortunately, the "every member ministry" idea has been (and still is, in some cases) the exception, not the rule, in the contemporary church. Instead, many have substituted the unBiblical and unhealthy model that separates the pulpit from the pew by distinguishing between the "clergy" and the "laity." In fact, it is possible that the practice of segregating between the clergy, as the superior and spiritual ecclesiastical caste, and the laity, as the inferior and part-time class in the church, was a major component of the first century group known as the Nicolaitanes. The word 'Nicolaitane' literally means "victory over the people." Perhaps the Nicolaitanes were a Gnostic sect within the church who attempted to dominate the faith of the "laity" by imposing a form of hierarchical rule by the clergy. This type of governmental hierarchy reached its zenith in medieval and pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism. The "laity," in many (perhaps most) cases, was not permitted to read the Bible. The common man, the priests maintained, could not understand the spiritual mysteries of Scripture, but must rely on the "clergy" to interpret it for him. To approach God, the people must employ the services of the priest, an official of "the church." It was unthinkable for the "laity" to presume

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to approach God personally and directly. At the mass, only the priests were permitted to sing. The "laity" were essentially passive observers, spectators of Divine worship, not participants. It was against this historical backdrop that the Reformers reaffirmed the Biblical emphasis concerning the priesthood of every believer. This idea was a breath of fresh air to a "laity" that was suffocating in the stagnant air of passive Christian living.

Some, however, like the Quakers, reacted to the opposite extreme. From the strict exclusivity of Catholicism, Quakerism adopted an unqualified inclusion that had the effect of disregarding that there was any such office as "evangelist" or "pastor/teacher" given to the church. At their public meetings, these "New Lights" (as they were called) virtually opened the floor for anyone to speak who might feel the nudge of the Spirit or who might have a word from God. Since women were stereotypically more spiritually-minded than men, they frequently assumed the active role of teaching in public worship. Arguably, all semblance of liturgy and structure and verbal exposition of Scripture by an ordained minister of the gospel was replaced by a kind of "free-for-all" approach to worship, in the spirit of "every member ministry."

I maintain that both the Catholic and the Quaker paradigms of "ministry" are lopsided and extremist. On a positive note, the Catholic position does recognize (and properly so) that there is an office of ministry in the church, an office Christ established to be filled by men He has called and the church has recognized through ordination. These are men who have the right and the responsibility to assume the role of spiritual leadership in the local church over which the Holy Ghost has made them overseers, {Ac 20:28} "taking the oversight, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind," {1Pe 5:2} not as lords over the faith of the people, but as helpers of their joy. In the Catholic emphasis on the office of the ministry, however, it loses the equally valid Biblical emphasis regarding the ministry of every believer. Quakerism, on the other hand, recognizes the need (and properly so) of every member ministry in the Body of Christ, but disinherits the equally valid Scriptural truth of an official role of public ministry in the church.

I fear that the modern mentality toward this subject in the church is a kind of strange mixture of the two ideas. In some cases, the people have developed an unnatural paranoia of ministers who attempt to assume their God-given role of leadership. Because of the potential that he might abuse his authority and become a dictator, legislating the idiosyncracies of his conscience upon them, some Christians have successfully divested their ministers (and some ministers have divested themselves) of the responsibilities of their office. Of course, the fear of a ministerial hierarchy is valid, but resistance to true Biblical leadership of a man of God is not. That's the Quaker side of the modern mindset toward ministry, a devaluing of the office that Christ gave to His church. {1Th 5:12-13; Heb 13:7,17}

What about the "clergy/laity" distinction? Does that mentality exist today? Well, strangely enough, it frequently co-exists with the anomaly I've just mentioned. Somewhere along the line, people began to think that the preacher was given to study the Bible for them, to interpret the Bible for them, and to be religious for them. Sound far-fetched? Then try this simple test. Ask yourself this question: "Is your consuming passion, that is, the object of your every waking thought, the ambition of your life, the desire to be totally and completely in love with Jesus Christ and in perpetual communion with Him? Would you like for all of your friends, peers, and

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contemporaries to think of you as a holy person?" Think about that for a moment, especially that last question: "Do you want, above anything else, the people who know you to think of you as a holy person?" Be honest, now. I'll wait while you examine your heart.

Perhaps some of my ruthlessly honest readers have come to this conclusion: "I want people to know that I go to church regularly and that I believe in God, but I don't want them to think of me as some kind of 'holy Joe.' I don't want them to be afraid that every time they talk to me I will automatically steer the conversation to God or religious fanatic. After all, I'm not a preacher." WAIT! TIME OUT! What did he say? "After all, I'm not a preacher." In other words, "Only preachers are supposed to be holy. I don't have to be holy, because I have a preacher to be holy for me." Now I know that there may be an element of hyperbole in my analysis of the modern Christian mentality. But if my basic assumption is accurate (namely, that some Christians think that because they are not preachers, they are not obliged to attend church as regularly, think as spiritually, study as seriously, or pray as fervently) then the "clergy/laity" double-standard is alive and well, at least at a subconscious level. Perhaps this "clergy/laity" double-standard is the dynamic behind the entertainment mentality that pervades Christendom today. When God's people divorce in their minds the message to which they are listening from the daily lives they are living, they lose the sense of the relevance of God's word, and slowly, but surely, begin to think of themselves as spectators, watching a show, rather than participants, receiving practical instruction for living. For example, the preacher may preach on the need to maintain the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading and prayer, but the individual who listens to that message with the presupposition that there is a different standard for preachers than for people will inevitably conclude that, however enjoyable the message was to listen to, it, nonetheless, did not apply to him. Consequently, no effort to change is made by the hearer.

The Biblical Model of "Ministry"

If both views, i.e. the view that exaggerates and the view that devalues the office of the ministry, are aberrations, then what does the Bible teach regarding the proper role of the gospel ministry in the church? Where is the balance between the two extremes? The answer is found in the two "pastoral" epistles of Paul. To a preacher named Timothy, Paul said, "Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." {1Ti 4:12} To Titus, Paul exhorted, "In all things showing thyself a pattern of good works: in doctrine showing uncorruptness, gravity, sincerity, sound speech, that cannot be condemned..." {Tit 2:7-8} The gospel minister is to live as "an example of the believers," "a pattern of good works." In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ gave the ministry to the church as a living example of what it means to be a Christian, an object lesson in discipleship. The ministry is Christianity in miniature. It is a microcosm of the Christian life. Through their ministry, the rank-and-file believer is instructed, inspired, and invested with the resources necessary to fulfill his ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

Discipleship in Microcosm

Let's explore the ramifications of this thought. What does it mean to say that the ministry is a microcosm of Christian discipleship? First of all, it means that preachers must model the message that they preach in daily life. When a believer looks at his pastor, he should see

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someone who personifies in his life, as closely as is possible in a fallen world, the very gospel he verbally proclaims on the Lord's day. Not only does our gracious God tell His church to live a life that is consistent with the gospel of Christ, but He also shows them how to live that life through the ministers He has given them. "Be an example of the believers" in your life, says Paul to Timothy. Now, of course, the supreme "example" of Christian living is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The gospel minister, because he is a man influenced by indwelling sin, is unqualified, in and of himself, to be the standard by which believers are measured. Only Jesus Christ is a perfect example. But it is not wrong for Christians to take their cues from the ministry, so long as the ministry is following Christ: "Be ye followers lit. imitators of me, even as I also am of Christ." {1Co 11:1}

The kind of life a minister leads will directly affect the effectiveness of the gospel he preaches. The Thessalonians received Paul's preaching "in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance." Notice, however, the key to Paul's powerful message-"For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power... as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake." {1Th 1:5 -emphasis mine} Paul's gospel preaching concerning Jesus Christ took on a relevance and a credibility because of his own godly life and example that it would not have had otherwise. What was the result? They "became followers lit. imitators of us, and of the Lord..." 1Th 1:6 The right to occupy a role of leadership in the church of Jesus Christ does not depend primarily on charisma (that is, a person's giftedness) but on character (that is, a person's Christian integrity). The late Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness." Why would he make such a surprising statement? Because he knew the connection between ministerial success and a holy lifestyle.

It is for precisely this reason that prayer for the moral integrity of God's servants is supremely important in the church today. Satan knows that if he can cripple and make caricatures out of pastors, then the church cannot be what she is supposed to be. Because preachers are the pace setters for the church, they are the special targets of the adversary. If the wicked one can tempt them to compromise theologically, ethically, or morally, he has delivered a strategic blow to the progress of Christ's kingdom in the earth. Then pray for your pastor, dear reader. Let your voice rise like a fountain night and day to God for His ministers. Pray for their family life, their personal attitudes, their financial needs, their moral strength. Pray that God would give them Biblical insight, understanding, guidance, and power when they stand to preach. The need is indeed urgent.

Let's get painfully practical. Combining the texts in 1Ti 4 and Tit 2, Paul lists seven categories in which a minister's life should be exemplary.

(1) Speech-"Be an example of the believers in word..." Preachers should be exemplary in their speech habits. Because the ministry is a microcosm of the Christian life, pastors should model self-discipline in the use of the tongue. Critical, sarcastic, abrasive and unkind words from a minister set a precedent within a community of faith for the same. When a preacher gossips, slanders, belittles, and casts doubts upon the integrity of his members or fellow ministers, he opens the floodgates for the compounding of tongue sins within the body of Christ. James warned, "My brethren, be not many masters lit. leaders, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the

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same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body." {Jas 3:1-2} In this age of mass communication, the need for recovery of the Biblical speech ethic among gospel ministers is great.

(2) Conduct- "Be an example of the believers...in conversation..." Conversation means "lifestyle, behavior, conduct." Ministers are intended to lead the way for the Lord's people in terms of godly conduct. They should regularly pray for wisdom to know how to conduct themselves in every given situation. Whether we realize it or not, unbelievers form their opinions of the Lord based on what they see in Christian people, and since believers tend to emulate their ministers, it is imperative for pastors to set the pace for godliness by an exemplary demeanor.

(3) Attitude- "Be an example of the believers...in charity..." Agape, the Greek word translated "charity," was virtually a Christian invention. The word was seldom if ever used in classical and secular Greek literature prior to the New Testament. Agape is essentially "a self-sacrificial commitment to another's welfare." Love, in other words, in the New Testament sense of the term, is not an emotional infatuation or attraction, but an unselfish willingness to give something up for the benefit of someone else. The epitome of agape is the cross. But ministers should also embody the agape attitude of preacher preach the importance of sacrificing one's time to serve Jesus Christ? Then he should model his message by waiving his rights to personal leisure and recreation when it conflicts with the service of his Lord. Does he preach the priority of financial sacrifice to the church? Then he should be willing to set the pace by regular, sacrificial giving himself. Does he warn the people he serves against covetousness, and encourage them to be content with God's promise to provide the necessities of life, then he should set the example by learning to be content with God's provision, whether he is rich or poor. Does he teach married couples that self-denial is the key to a happy Christian marriage, then he must practice it himself. Does he preach about the gracious Savior's compassion to the walking wounded, then he must personify that same compassion to others who fall. Love, the greatest Christian doctrine, must be the dominate characteristic of his life. Inevitably, those under his ministry will follow suit.

(4) Disposition- "Be an example of the believers...in spirit..." A gospel minister is called to be a living illustration of the difference Jesus Christ can make in a person's general temperament. Though people are born with certain temperamental bents (e.g. sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, and choleric), Christ, through the Spirit's sanctifying influence, can change those tendencies. He can take a person prone to irritability and crankiness and make him patient, kind, considerate, and gentle. He can transform cynics into encouragers and those prone to depression into cheerful, joyful Christians. Solomon said, "A man of understanding is of an excellent spirit." {Pr 17:27} A preacher's insight into the truth should manifest itself in an exemplary disposition. A pastor who has a humble, gentle, servant's heart, will infect the church he serves with the joy germ.

(5) Devotion- "Be an example of the believers...in faith..." "Faith" is essentially a metaphysical concept. It deals with the question, "What is real?" To most people, reality is defined by the tangible world. Skyscrapers, freeways, automobiles, material possessions, other people- these are the things of which reality is made to most people. In other words, most people "live by

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sight." The Christian, on the contrary, is called to "live by faith." {Hab 2:4; Ro 1:17; Ga 2:20; 2Co 5:8} To the Christian who lives by faith, God, heaven, and angels are just as real as the tangible realities of earthly existence. Prayer, worship, and other devotional activities are supremely practical and realistic. Ministers must model such a conviction of God's reality by maintaining the spiritual disciplines of prayer, meditation, and Bible intake. In other words, pastors are called to be "an example of faith," an object lesson that God is real. Because the ministry is Christianity in miniature, preachers should think of themselves, first and foremost, as Christians: "The husbandman that laboreth must be first partaker of the fruits." {2Ti 2:6} Perhaps one of the greatest temptations in the ministry is the temptation to substitute work in the service of Christ for devotion to the person of Christ, or to confuse one's position with his identity. All true service for the Lord must begin in personal communion with the Lord. I have discovered in my own experience that it is virtually impossible for me to preach in an edifying way about the cross when I am not living close to the cross. "Be an example of faith" means live as if God is real: "... for he that cometh to God must believe that He is..." { Heb 11:6} Many professed believers live like practical atheists, as if God is disconnected and unconcerned about life. Preachers are called to set the pace for the people for a daily relationship with the Lord. In keeping with this thought, the ministry should be a microcosm of spiritual growth. Paul employs an intriguing word picture in 1Ti 4:15: "Give thyself wholly to them that thy profiting may appear to all." The Greek word translated "profiting," means "pioneer advance." The verb form means "to go forward; to cut through." The word was originally a nautical term meaning "to forge ahead and to make headway." Paul wanted Timothy to develop a pioneer spirit, an insatiable desire to forge ahead into new territories of spiritual growth and personal maturity. Paul's point is that others will notice Timothy's spiritual growth and will be stimulated to godliness by his example. Christian people who see their pastor growing spiritually are encouraged by that example to greater levels of spiritual maturity themselves. I've never known a church that was growing spiritually whose pastor was not blazing the trail before them by his own spiritual progress. When ministers cease to prioritize personal spiritual growth, churches will also. "Be an example of faith" also means "show others by your patience under trial and faithfulness in times of persecution that God is trustworthy and that his promises are reliable." The words of Eliphaz to Job have, from time to time, stung me a little: "Behold thou hast instructed many, and thou has strengthened the weak hands. Thy words have upholden him that was falling, and thou hast strengthened the feeble knees. But now it is come upon thee, and thou faintest; it toucheth thee, and thou art troubled." {Job 4:3-5} These words arrested John Newton as he struggled with self-pity and despair at the bedside of his invalid wife. He thought to himself, "I've preached that God is faithful, that faith must take hold of His promise in the time of trouble. Now is the time to prove that God is able to sustain those who put their trust in Him." He pulled himself together and proceeded to care for her and maintain his rigorous schedule, trusting in God. He preached on the day of her death, and even subsequently preached his own wife's funeral. He was an example to the believers of faith in God.

(6) Morality- "Be an example of the believers...in purity..." Because I've already addressed this subject earlier, I'll not do so again.

(7) Theology- "Showing thyself a pattern...in doctrine, showing uncorruptness...." { Tit 2:7} The ministry must be an example to the church of theological integrity. If ministers do not submit reverantly to the teaching of Scripture, even those subjects that may be personally unpalatable

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to them, they will encourage a surge of all kinds of weird and eccentric ideas. The church is not a forum for public debate concerning the essentials of the Christian faith. The sin of unbelief within the gospel ministry fuels the promotion of unbelief within the body. Ministers must never be deceptive, dishonest, or vague in the way they handle God's word. Because of his position of influence, the minister must resist the maverick desire to be novel and different, lest he derail those under his care. Sound doctrine preached by a man concerned with theological integrity will produce healthy Christians who can minister to the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord. Finally, to say that the ministry is a microcosm of the Christian life means that God's people must learn to think of their ministers as patterns to be emulated, not substitutes to be observed. Is the minister called to full-time Christian service? Then the rank-and-file Christian is too! Is the minister supposed to put the Lord first in his life? Then every believer is too. Is the pastor supposed to be totally committed to the Lord Jesus Christ? Then the ordinary church member is too. Is he supposed to be present at public worship every Lord's day? Then you are too. We must once and for all dispel the notion that the preacher is a religious professional whose career is church life and whose hobbies may be secular, while believers are people whose careers are primarily secular and whose hobbies may be religious. Every believer, preacher and people alike, is called to devote his/her entire life and energy to the Lord Jesus. All of life is sacred and all, consequently, must be lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The pastor does not serve the Lord for the people. Rather, he serves his Lord by serving his Lord's people, and they, in turn, serve their Lord by serving the Lord's people as well.

So, "it is not a vain thing for you to serve the Lord, for it is your life." Thanks be to God he has given us gospel ministers who teach us His word, and then model that word in their own lives as a living illustration of Christianity. May we follow their lead, and then, mobilize to minister to others in the name of our blessed Lord.