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Spiritual ministry: What is it?

Roger Pascoe

We talk about "ministry" as though it is self-evident what the term implies. This article will attempt to define briefly a biblical philosophy of church ministry by addressing the following questions: What is the purpose of ministry? What is "church" all about? Why does the church exist? These are fundamental questions that a biblical theology of ministry must answer.

Christian ministry is the activity and responsibility of the local church in the fulfillment of its biblically defined mandate in the world. The ministry of the church can be defined in several ways. First, the ministry of the Church can be defined as the fulfillment of the Great Commandment of our Lord: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt 22:37, 39). Second, Christian ministry can be defined in terms of the Great Commission of our Lord: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). Third, the process and objective of Christian ministry can be defined in the Apostle Paul's terms as "the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect person, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we...may grow up in all things into Him who is the head, that is, Christ" (Eph 4:12-15). Fourth, ministry can be defined in terms of the model of the early church, that is, teaching the apostles' doctrine, engaging in fellowship, the breaking of bread, praying together, caring for one another, worshipping God, and actively evangelizing the community

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(Acts 2:42-47). This continues to be the basis of biblical, balanced ministry today.

From these summary texts and the broad scope of Scripture, it is evident that Christian ministry has as its priority the worship of God, followed by service for God in the proclamation of the gospel (the fruit of which is the baptism of repentant sinners), and the edification of the saints.

Why formulate a biblical philosophy of ministry?

We are all prone to make up our own philosophy of ministry, based on our own concept of what the church is supposed to do. The truth is, however, that God has clearly laid out for us in Scripture what is the ministry of the church. We don't decide why the church exists (its purpose) nor what it is supposed to do (its mission). God has already done that because the church is his institution on earth, not ours! Our responsibility is to determine how to most effectively and appropriately achieve our biblical mandate in our local community at our time in history.

It is vital to formulate a biblical philosophy of ministry. This will enable church leadership to understand whether or not a church's ministry is functioning effectively and fully according to its biblical mandate.

A philosophy of ministry is a statement that synthesizes the biblical material on the subject in a systematic form. By articulating a philosophy of ministry, you establish a benchmark and standard by which you measure your ministry. It is a yardstick that enables you to measure the degree to which you are achieving your ministry responsibilities. It is a "constitution" that helps you to decide on every course of ministry action in your church.

There are a number of practical benefits that flow from defining a

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biblical philosophy of ministry.

1. It forces us to be biblical. This keeps us from making up our own philosophy that might be unbiblical. When we impose our own philosophy over the biblical teaching of ministry, we begin to move away from God's foundation and become focused on our goals, pet ministries, etc.

2. It makes practical sense. It helps us set actual goals that are consistent with our biblical mandate (cf. 1 Cor 9:26) so that the philosophy of ministry becomes practical in our culture and community.

3. It improves efficiency by preventing us from spending time on activities or beginning ministry efforts that are not part of the biblical mandate for the church. It thus defines the limits/scope of ministry. It is an objective measuring stick by which to make decisions regarding potential ministry activities.

4. It heightens our effectiveness. If you have no clearly defined operational or philosophical parameters, then you won't have clearly defined achievable goals that are consistent with those parameters—i.e. you won't have a road map and, therefore, you won't know where you are going, and, consequently, you probably won't get there. The early church knew exactly why they existed and where they were going and all their activity was focused on achieving those ends.

5. It helps us to be faithful to our call to ministry. Ministry is a vocation in which it is very easy to get caught up with activities that are not necessary or part of the church's program on earth. We need to keep on course in our own ministry, doing what God has called us and mandated us to do.

6. It motivates the church to conduct itself in accordance with God's plan for the church.¹

A biblical philosophy of church ministry

This philosophy needs to be organized under seven areas of church ministry. The sequence in which these topics are presented is not intended to indicate their order of priority but simply to provide systematic headings for these essential aspects of a biblically-based ministry.

First, the foundation for ministry is the accurate and relevant teaching and preaching of God's Word (Acts 2:42a; 2 Tim 4:2; Col 1:28; 1 Cor 1:23; 2:1-5). The exposition of the Scriptures and their application to the hearers are fundamental to the spiritual growth and development of God's people (2 Tim 3:16; 4:2). It is the responsibility of the pastor (and others who have the gift of preaching and teaching) to instruct God's people in the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). This is best done by systematically preaching through books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, so that the whole scope of Scripture is covered. Such preaching and teaching: (1) provides God's people with the spiritual nourishment that they need to "grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 3:18); (2) equips the saints "for the work of the ministry"; and (3) builds up the body of Christ, so that God's people "come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:7-16).

Expository preaching is the biblical model for the public proclamation of God's Word. The term "expository preaching" is often misunderstood and associated with a clinical, "dry" exegesis of Scripture. However, this is not fair or accurate. Expository preaching, properly defined and practised, is the proclamation of God's Word

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in the power of the Holy Spirit that its meaning is accurately and clearly explained and that its message is relevantly and concretely applied to contemporary life with a view to generating a spiritually life-transforming response from the hearers. Paul's exhortation in I Timothy 4:2 is probably the shortest and simplest definition of true expository preaching: "Preach the Word."

Second, the confidence for spiritual ministry is prayer (Acts 2:42d). An active and dynamic prayer ministry is vital for the survival and growth of each believer individually and the church corporately. A prayer ministry should be diverse in its form (e.g. small groups, prayer teams, prayer partners, corporate prayer), broad in its objectives, and widespread throughout the church body. Prayer should be part of the life of the church on a consistent basis (cf. Acts 1:14; 4:23-31; 12:5; 1 Thess 5:17) and must begin with the example of the church leaders (Acts 6:4; Col 4:12). Among other things, the church is to pray for its leaders (1 Thess 5:25; 2 Thess 3:1); for one another (Jas 5:16); for authorities (1 Tim 2:1-4); for the widespread and bold proclamation of the gospel (Eph 6:18-20; 2 Thess 3:1); for those who are sick (Jas 5:14-16); and for the unity and testimony of the church (Jn 17:11-23). We can learn much about the form and content of our prayers from the example of the Apostle Paul's prayers (Eph 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Phil 1:2-11; Col 1:3-6, 9-14; 1 Thess 1:2-4; 5:23; 2 Thess 1:3-5, 11-12).

Third, the power for ministry is the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; 1 Cor 2:1-5; 1 Thess 1:5; 1 Pet. 1:12). The Holy Spirit can and does make the ministry of the church effective and powerful. He alone changes people's lives into conformity with the will of God and into the image of God's Son (Rom 8:29; Eph 1:11-14; Col 1:9). He alone has the power to convict people of sin (Jn 16:8) and grant them new life in Christ (Jn 3:5; Tit 3:5); to enable us to live holy lives (1 Cor 6:19; 1 Pet. 1:2); to pray effectively (Rom 8:26; Jude 20); to minister the Word with power (1 Cor 2:1-5; 1 Thess 1:5-6); to glorify God in our

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lives (I Cor 6:20); and to illuminate our understanding of God's Word (I Cor 2:13-16; I Jn 2:20, 27).

Fourth, the bond of ministry is the fellowship of believers (Acts 2:42b, 44-45). Our common bond in Christ is the source of our fellowship and our unity. Through fellowship believers express the local representation of the body of Christ (I Jn 1:7; I Cor 12:26; Eph 2:19-22). When believers are interconnected through authentic, loving relationships, they form a unity that provides strength and stability to the church. This fellowship is demonstrated by caring for one another physically, emotionally, psychologically, economically, and spiritually. The care of God's people is a church-wide ministry in which all the members of the body care for the interests of each other, supporting each other in practical ways, in prayer, and in love (cf. Acts 4:32-37; 6:1; I Cor 12:25; Gal 5:13; 6:2; Eph 4:32; 5:21).

As Gene Getz puts it: "Christians cannot grow effectively in isolation! They need to experience each other."² Church leaders, therefore, should ensure that the church body engages in regular fellowship as a community of believer with a common life in Christ, common goals, common needs, and common interests.

Fifth, the expression of ministry is passionate worship (Acts 2:42c). In worship the church expresses collectively its awe of God and its debt of gratitude to God for who he is and what he has done. Don Carson describes worship as "the proper response of all moral, sentient beings to God, ascribing all honour and worth to their Creator-God precisely because he is worthy, delightfully so."³ Vibrant and dynamic worship is vital to the life and health of the church as a body and its members individually. Worship must be a lifelong, daily practice for all believers individually in order for corporate worship to be effective and meaningful. Public worship includes singing praise to God, reading Scripture, corporate prayer, preaching the Word, and the observance of the church ordinances.

The Lord's Table is utterly central to our worship because it sym-

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bolizes the very basis for our existence as believers and as a church. It focuses us on the remembrance of Christ's death from the perspective of his resurrection, and looks forward to his return (I Cor II:23-26). The event to which the entire Old Testament looked forward and which is the fulcrum of redemptive history ought to be vitally important and a regular occurrence in our church ministry.

Sixth, a key thrust of ministry is the salvation of the lost (Acts 2:47; 5:42; Matt 28:20; Mk 16:15; Rom 10:14-15). Not only is practical Christian ministry expressed in caring about each other as believers, but also in caring about unbelievers. Christian ministry boldly proclaims the goodness of God in the gospel in order to reach the lost for Christ (Rom 2:4). This should be done in culturally relevant ways, both personally and corporately. The gospel message of "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21; Rom 10:9-10) should be regularly preached from the pulpit and the people should be trained and motivated to tell others the way of salvation. In this way the church and its members become a light for God in the community (Matt 5:14-16). Through prayer and financial support, they can also contribute to world evangelization through missions.

Seventh, the scope of ministry is church-wide (I Cor 12-14; Rom 12:1-8; I Pet 4:10-11). Ministry is a task to which every believer has been called (Eph 4:12; Rom. 12:4-8). As Christians learn and grow, so they must use the gifts God has given them in his service and for the benefit of the whole church (I Cor 12:1-31). The leaders of the church should affirm the members in their spiritual gifts, train them in the use of those gifts, provide them with opportunity to use them, and motivate them to do so (Eph 4:11-16; 2 Tim 1:6; I Tim 1:18; I Tim 4:6-11; Acts 13:3), either within their own church, on the mission field, or wherever God calls them. In this process, new leaders are identified and trained to provide spiritual leadership.

Indeed, church-wide ministry is not limited to each individual

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local church but extends to the body of Christ in its broadest scope. Thus, churches of similar theological persuasion should co-operate together at a local level (1) to orchestrate the full scope of church ministry that a local church may not be able to do on its own; (2) to hold local churches accountable to a wider body; (3) to give visible evidence of the truth that we compose a united body; and (4) to make united decisions on issues that might otherwise be divisive. This practice was evident in the early church in discipleship (Acts 11:26), economic relief efforts (Acts 11:27-30), and important doctrinal and practical decisions (Acts 15:1-36).

Conclusion

What, then, is spiritual ministry? In sum, the purpose of spiritual ministry is (1) to bring people to saving faith in Christ and then assist them to grow in Christ-likeness; and (2) to bring every believer into a vital, authentic relationship with God through the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, such that every believer glorifies God in thought, word, and deed both in the church and in the world with the ultimate goal of presenting every one complete in Christ (Col 1:28).

The purpose of a truly spiritual ministry is not to "do" church. As Glenn Wagner points out:

The essence of the church must be more than just doing. The church must draw its essence from God and his righteousness and holiness. It must take shape based on his worth as Creator. It must reflect his glory as God, and when it meets and ministers, it ought to express back to God the glory due his name. There must be more to church than simple psychological encouragements, tips for improving interpersonal relationships, and helpful religious seminars.⁴

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Ministry is not about ritual or routine religion but a living relationship with God. It is not about numerical growth but spiritual maturity. It is not about programmes but about people—people who are wholly focused on God, powerfully filled with the Spirit, and happily united in a community of grace; people who vibrantly exalt Christ, openly perform works of faith, accurately teach the truth, boldly proclaim the gospel, and authentically depend upon prayer.

Soli Deo Gloria.

ENDNOTES

¹ Alex Montoya, "Approaching Pastoral Ministry Scripturally" in John MacArthur Jr. et al., eds., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1995), 66–67.

² Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Colorado Springs: Victor Books, 1984), 164.

³ D.A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 12.

⁴ E. Glenn Wagner with Steve Halliday, *The Church You've Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 33.

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