

TO EQUIP GOD'S PEOPLE: NOTES ON A THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

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The need for a theology of ministry hardly requires defense in this setting; but it may be useful to reflect on the extent and depth of that need. I want to be clear from the outset that we cannot identify ministry and clergy, that lay ministry and ordained ministry are equally significant aspects of the church's mission. However, the need for theological reflection about the meaning of ministry becomes especially clear and poignant in relation to the clergy's understanding of itself and its vocation.

Two decades ago, in 1956, Richard Niebuhr wrote an important study entitled *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*. In it he writes of the clergy as "the perplexed profession." Again and again he speaks of confusion among the clergy as respects their ministry. He uses such terms as "indefiniteness, vagueness and conflict," "perplexity and vagueness," "uncertainty," "mistiness"—all of them descriptive of the clergy's own self-understanding.¹

To document his case, Niebuhr cites a work written twenty years earlier—that means in the 1930's—which spoke of "lack of agreement" and uncertainty at every level of church life and work, with respect to the meaning of ministry. Niebuhr himself voices the hope that his own time might see a diminishing of the uncertainty and "an emerging new conception of the ministry."²

Another decade passes. In 1968 James Glasse writes of "the identity crisis of the parish clergy."³ Two years later a thoughtful sociologist makes precisely the same diagnosis of the condition of the ordained ministry. Describing the struggles of churches, during the sixties, as perhaps "the most serious ferment in Christendom since the Protestant Reformation," he finally points to what may be the most serious dimension of that crisis, the "*crisis of identity* for the Protestant clergyman."⁴ All of Niebuhr's earlier terms, despite his hopes, could be repeated in 1970, to describe the clergy's confusion and uncertainty

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¹Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and its Ministry*, p. 48ff.

²*Op. cit.*, p. 52.

³Cf. the subtitle of his book, *Profession: Ministry*.

⁴Jeffrey K. Hadden, *The Gathering Storm in the Churches*, pp. 3, 239.

about its ministry. One may suppose that the situation has not changed materially in the near decade since then.

I draw two conclusions from these observations. First, we must recognize that the issue is not a new one, but a condition that has been troubling the church for half a century at least. This has important implications for understanding and interpreting our present concerns. We did not arrive here overnight; and we are not likely to emerge the day after tomorrow.

Moreover, the issue is primarily a theological one. Certainly, social and cultural changes have shaped the issue and contributed to our uncertainty; but the basic questions are theological. What is the Church and what is its mission? What is the meaning of ministry, both lay and clergy? What is the significance of ordination? These are theological questions—questions of long standing, which will require of us theological inquiry of the most serious kind.

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What I propose here are notes—unfinished and tentative—looking toward a continuing multilogue among the appropriate disciplines, as we seek to clarify and to affirm a theology of ministry. Let me begin by stating the three theses that are central to the discussion. Then we can engage in further reflection on them.

I. Christian ministry is rooted in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Its essential meaning is found in the term which he quite deliberately chose to identify his ministry: diakonia, service. The forms of this ministry, as the church has tried to carry it forward, are historically and culturally conditioned. They must be evaluated in relation to Christ's own self-understanding and the understanding of his "apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2.20), as these understandings are communicated to us in the documents which grew out of their interaction.

II. The ministry of Christ is given to the whole People of God, as the first generation of Christians came to understand themselves. Every person who is a member of this People is called to Christian ministry. The diakonia of Christ is enacted by his Body. All members of that Body are endowed with gifts and graces which qualify them for ordination to the diaconate, the service rendered by the Body.

III. The ministry of clergy can best be understood in the context of the ministry of the whole People of God. We cannot attempt a definition of ordination, and then ask what remains as the work of the laity. We must ask first what is the ministry of the laity, the laos, the People of God; and then we may hope to discern what is the meaning of an ordained diakonia within the larger diakonia of the laos.

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I. Christian ministry is rooted in the ministry of Christ himself, and the meaning which he and his followers gave to it.

In terms of our self-understanding as ministers of Christ, the most striking aspect of Jesus' understanding of himself is the radical term in which he chose to identify his ministry. Deliberately rejecting all terms which were currently used to identify positions of secular and religious leadership, he chose a word which must have shocked his followers. He said discipleship means "diakonia," service—indeed, very humble service.

The incident in which this comes to clearest expression is recorded in Mark 10.35-45 (par. Mt. 20.20-28). As a consequence of an embarrassingly human episode, Jesus comments that leadership in Gentile society means exercising authority over others, lording it over them. Then he adds, "It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve (*diakonaisai*) and to give his life a ransom for many." (vv. 43-45) The meaning of my ministry, he is saying, is *diakonia*; and if you are to be my disciples you must undertake a similar *diakonia*. The special mark of my ministry, and of those who share my ministry, is service—simple, humble service.

We must be careful not to oversimplify our reflections at this point. To affirm the linkage between our ministry and Christ's ministry implies a Christology, a belief concerning who he was; and we cannot elicit a well-rounded Christology simply from a study of the term *diakonia*. Jesus said further things about himself. Indeed, in this very saying, when Jesus adds, "to give his life a ransom for many," he is using language which is reminiscent of the Suffering Servant, and which has evoked much theological reflection in the story of the church. He said also, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." (Lu. 19.10) This suggests not only who he is but what he does; and further theological reflection is stimulated.

It is small wonder, then, that Jesus' understanding has to be complemented by his followers' understanding of him. Not only could he not say it all himself; but the meaning of his life and work could be interpreted only after his death and resurrection. So the servant theme is repeated and deepened.

He "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, . . . and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Phil. 2.7-8) "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered." (He-

brews 5.8) "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor. 5.19)

These interpretations point to a crucially important development which had already taken place in the Christian community. Bultmann states it precisely: "He who formerly had been the *bearer* of the message was drawn into it and became its essential *content*. *The proclaimer became the proclaimed.*"⁵ Kung uses remarkably similar language, and adds that "the *message of Jesus himself* was not forgotten . . . The Church is preaching the same as Jesus preached; his preaching of the reign of God is genuinely continued by the Church's preaching of the reign of Christ."⁶

Indeed, the Gospels which reflect Jesus' understanding of himself as servant were written and cherished in a community which had already come to believe in him as sent to fulfill God's own *diakonia* to the world. Precisely because Christ was God's Deacon, enacting the diaconate to which he was ordained, his ministry becomes the origin, the source and sustenance, of our ministry as his followers, his deacons.

In carrying out this ministry, the first generation of Christ's followers came to understand themselves as the Body of Christ, God's New People. It is to these images we now turn.

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II. The ministry of Christ is given to the newly-constituted People of God. His *diakonia* is enacted by the Body of Christ.

A hidden theological issue is implicit in the discussion of this thesis. We will examine the experience of the first generation of the church as recounted and interpreted in the documents of the New Testament. These documents and the church's understanding of its experience become definitive for our own understanding of ministry. The New Testament Church, in Kung's words, is "the original design; we cannot copy it today, but we can and must translate it into modern terms."⁷ So the documents which grew out of the life of the church become the criterion by which the church's continuing tradition is evaluated. "The Bible is one of the conditions out of which the community grows and continues."⁸

Our task now is to examine the experience of the New Testament Church, primarily as it is interpreted in the Epistles. Let me state at

⁵Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, Vol. I, p. 33.

⁶Hans Kung, *The Church*, p. 96, cf. pp. 80, 88.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸James M. Gustafson, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*, p. 106.

the outset the conclusion to which I have been drawn, and do so in a quotation which seems to be representative of studies in this field.

There is then no single form or pattern of ministry apparent in the New Testament, nor is there (directly) a single or unified theological basis for one. We see rather a fairly random distribution of names, titles, and functions in relation to ministry, and theological appreciations of its significance which vary considerably.⁹

One conclusion, however, seems quite clear. The ministry of Christ is given to the whole People of God, newly understood. The ministry of Christ is now entrusted to the Church, as the Body of Christ. The question before us then is how do the followers of Christ carry out his ministry. How do they enact the diakonia to which they believe they have been called?

There are two primary images by which the followers of Christ understood themselves and their ministry: the People of God and the Body of Christ. A brief examination of these images will yield insight into the meaning of Christian ministry. (Obviously, any complete pursuit of this concern will lead to a doctrine of the Church.)

My first impression was that the term "the People of God" does not figure so largely as the other, more familiar image. The only direct use of the term is in I Peter 2:9-10. Depending on one's translation, the two images come together in a rather striking fashion in Eph. 4.12. (In the NEB, for example, "saints" is rendered "God's people".) If one adds to this the Greek term *ekklesia*, which seems to carry the meaning of the People of God, the usage becomes quite significant.

The definitive word, of course, is *laos*, the People. The Old Testament image is translated into the New Testament experience. The followers of Christ consider themselves the new Israel, the newly-constituted People of God. The ministry of Christ is committed to his new People. Every member of the *ekklesia* is called to diakonia. All members of the *laos* together constitute the diakonate.

A few sentences from Hans Kung put the matter in sharp clarity.

All the faithful belong to the people of God; there must be no *clericalization* of the Church. . . . If the Church is the true people of God, it is impossible to differentiate between "Church" and "laity", as though the laity were not in a very real sense "*laos*". This would be a *clericalizing* misconception of the Church. . . .

⁹*The Study of Liturgy*, ed. Jones, Wainwright, Yarnold, p. 291.

The word *laos* in the New Testament as also in the Old Testament, indicates no distinction *within* the community as between priests ("clerics") and people ("laity"). It indicates rather the fellowship of all in a single community.¹⁰

Distinctions there are, however; "varieties of gifts, . . . varieties of service, . . . varieties of working.." (I Cor. 12.4-5) These are brought out most fully in the development of the image of the Church as Body of Christ. As the body has many members with different functions, so in the ministry of Christ there is a variety of gifts (charismata) which are exercised in a variety of ministries (diakonai).

There are three lists of ministries in the church, three lists of gifts to be expressed in service: Rom. 12.6-8, I Cor. 12.28, Eph. 4.11. The longest list is in I Cor., although the list in Romans is almost as long. To the Corinthians Paul acknowledges that speaking in tongues is indeed a proper gift, but adds that interpretation is equally significant (Cf. Chap. 14). And we ought not to overlook the fact—as is so frequently done—that the love which is celebrated in Chapter 13 is regarded as the supreme gift of the Spirit, pervading and motivating all ministries of the Body.

There is, of course, no exact correlation among these lists; no attempt is made to offer an exact delineation of Christian ministries. Two, however, do appear in all three lists: prophet and teacher. Paul puts high value on the ministry of prophecy (I Cor. 14.1). This appears to be the work of preaching, by which the body is "edified", "built up" (not unrelated, obviously, to teaching). To these Paul adds the ministries of administration or "serving"; and there are healers, helpers, those who carry out "acts of mercy". One can see here, in simple form, the services by which the Church, the Body of Christ, carries out the ministry of Christ: preaching/teaching, administering, and serving personal needs not only within the body but to those in society.

It is especially interesting to note that the ministry of preaching is given to the whole People. The statement in I Peter 2.9 affirms that "God's own people" are to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called (them) out of darkness into his wonderful light". To the Corinthians Paul suggests that it is acceptable for more than one "prophet" to speak, provided that they do it one at a time. (I Cor. 14.29-33) The historical record in Acts indicates that, in spite of the misgivings which Paul expresses elsewhere, there are women among the prophets (Acts 21.9). These statements would seem to carry the clear implication, so

¹⁰Kung, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-126.

frequently overlooked in subsequent generations (including our own), that "every Christian is called to be a preacher of the word, in the widest sense."¹¹

It remains now for us to look more carefully into the purpose of these ministries. Before doing so, however, let me add a word which is really too important to be confined to a brief note, but which must be so compressed here.

The church is the community of the Holy Spirit. In all of these discussions of the Body with its functions, the People with their gifts, there is frequent reference to the Holy Spirit. The initiative in forming the church lies with God. We do not invent the church; God calls it into being. God chooses his People. We do not simply join the church; the Spirit calls us into the church (*ekklesia*). Our joining is response to his calling; our institutions are our response to what we perceive as divine intention. The gifts which qualify us for ministry are not simply native endowments; they are gifts of the Spirit. As Paul puts it: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." (I Cor. 12.7)

It is the continuing presence of the Spirit in the church which enables our ministries. As individuals we are guided and empowered by the Spirit. As a body, a people, we are bound into a purposeful unity by the presence of the Spirit: "Eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. . . . There is one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." (Eph. 4.3-6)

It is precisely reflections of the kind which have engaged us in these two theses which call for a still deeper theological understanding of the being of the God who needs and calls a People, whose definitive act of calling is through his Servant, Jesus Christ, whose continuing call and empowerment is the quiet ministry of our Lord, the Spirit. Niebuhr is right when he comments that careful thinking about the nature and ministry of the Church will draw us to "the historic and apparently necessary Trinitarian understanding of the divine reality on which the Church depends".¹²

III. The ministry of the ordained clergy can best be understood in the context of the whole People of God, as equipping them for their ministries.

We have noted the varieties of gifts which enable the Body of Christ to carry out its ministry. These seem to suggest the possibility

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 377.

¹²Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 20-21, see also p. 31.

of distinctions among members of the Body, and even the possible development of leadership within the People. We need to ask, then, what are the purposes to be served by these gifts and the ministries in which they are expressed.

A striking statement in Ephesians not only offers a concise summary of the reasons for these various ministries, but also brings together the two primary images of the church. The author is writing about the special gifts which characterize the ministries of leadership in the church. The purpose of these gifts, he writes, is "to equip God's people for work in his service (diakonias), to the building up of the body of Christ." (Eph. 4.12 NEB)

Since our subject here is ministry, I suggest that we reverse these two phrases. One reason why leadership is to be exercised in the church is "the building up of the body of Christ." Paul puts great emphasis on this in his extended counsel to the Corinthians. The thrust of Chapter 14 is that the charismatic gifts of the Spirit are to be exercised so as to "edify", to "build up" the body. Commentators are careful to point out that this is a corporate image. But I suspect that one has a healthy body only as the "members" of that body are healthy and able to function well. An effective People of God is possible only if it is composed of effective persons. So we are pointed to the nurturing ministries of the church. They do not yet constitute a "clergy;" but they point to leadership exerted by "apostles...prophets...evangelists...pastors and teachers." (Eph. 4.11)

The other purpose of these ministries is "to equip God's people for work in his service (diakonias)." We are ready now to inquire more carefully into questions implicit in this statement. What is the ministry of God's People, the laos, the laity? What sort of equipment does the laity need in order to carry out this ministry? Are there special ministries, services, diakoniai, which are designed to enable the laos to gain this equipment?

Answers to these questions may be indicated in further examination of other New Testament documents and their interpretation of leadership in the church. We have identified Paul's understanding: a sort of informal, ad hoc, charismatic leadership. But there are later writings, the Pastoral Epistles, in which a somewhat different interpretation of leadership emerges.

Apparently, alongside of Paul's informal listing of ministries in the church, there was another development rooted in the Jewish experience out of which the church emerged. The Jewish communities had leaders whom they designated elders, presbyters. Some of the scribes seem to have practiced with their students a rite called ordination. It

was natural, then, that in some Christian communities this model of leadership be adopted. The Pastoral Letters reflect this development. The offices of bishop and deacon are identified (I Tim. 3, Titus 1, see also Phil. 1.1) Soon it is suggested that there be one bishop over a community. A distinction develops between presbyter and people. By the turn of the century, Kung writes, "the division between 'clergy' and 'laity', the 'people' is complete."¹³ This is the beginning of what Bultmann calls "the development toward the Ancient Church."¹⁴

The key question now is how one reads this history. The tradition, already present in the New Testament, moves beyond its beginnings, and takes on forms which are determined largely by the cultures in which they develop. How do we read this? Do these new forms corrupt the original intent of the Church? Or do they enhance and carry forward its ministries?

One may accept the necessity and propriety of such an historical development. History continued longer than the first generation of Christians apparently expected. The church grew numerically and spread out geographically. The issues involved in relating to a pagan society were too complex to be handled on an ad hoc, charismatic basis. So it became necessary to enlist a leadership which accepted responsibility, which was accountable to the community, and which afforded continuity as well as authority. So members of the laos were chosen to be deacons and elders; clergy became the official leaders of the congregations. The distinctions grew and took a variety of forms.

These forms were shaped by the cultures in which they were developed. So the inevitable question arises: How do we evaluate the forms which the ministries of the church took. . .and take? There was and is one basic criterion. Developing traditions of ministry must be held accountable to their origins, as these are described in the documents growing out of this primitive history. Forms of ministry, varieties of offices, kinds of authority, must be evaluated in relation to Christ's self-understanding and the early church's understanding of him and of itself as continuing his ministry. The documents of the New Testament are basic to our knowledge of these understandings, hence authoritative in the life of the church.

Out of such considerations grew the classic judgment: the church is reformed and continually being reformed.

This may be seen as a proper rationale for an ordained ministry. From among the laos some are called to positions of leadership. In

¹³Kung, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

¹⁴Bultmann, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, Part IV.

order to enable the Body to carry out its ministries, some of its members, who have appropriate gifts and graces, are given the ministries of preaching/teaching, administration, "acts of mercy." The diakonia of the People calls forth an ordained diaconate. But always the reason for the ministry of the clergy is to equip God's people for their ministry. Ministry of clergy and ministry of laity are correlative functions of the ministry of Christ in the world. Differences between these ministries are strictly differences of service. Ordination confers no special status or rank; it confers only a special service and responsibility.

Ordained ministry, then, may properly be designated a profession. To equip themselves for their work of ministry, clergy need professional training. There is some risk in this designation. Clergy may come to be thought of, or to think of themselves, as a category apart from—even above—laity. So we need constantly to remind ourselves that the profession of clergy has meaning only in relation to the People of God. The ordained deacon or elder is a servant of Christ; the diaconate is service to the People of God, to equip them for their diaconate.

If this is true, it is imperative that we have a clearer and fuller understanding of the ministry of the laity. Most commonly, laity are encouraged to think of their ministry as work in the church; and certainly it is true that participation in the life of the church is a part of Christian lay ministry. But there is a much broader and more significant ministry of the laity.

Lay ministry is carried out in society. The laity are to be God's People in the world. The members of the Body of Christ are to serve him in the society in which they live and work. This is the implication to be drawn from these images as they are interpreted in the New Testament. Interestingly enough, some of the most eloquent expressions of this understanding of lay ministry are to be found in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity issued by Vatican II in the mid-60s.

Such considerations force us to ask what is God's work in the world? How do we serve Christ in society? We would agree that the forms of service will vary with the society in which they are exercised. Diakonia will have different meaning in twentieth-century democratic, capitalistic society than it did in the first century, or the Middle Ages, or perhaps even in the societies of developing countries in our own time. There would seem to be, however, certain continuing forms of lay ministry: to build a responsible society; to develop a political and economic order in which our basic humanity is recognized; to shape a society in which human interests are given opportunity for development.

There are other human needs as well. We search for meaning; and the claims of faith have to be related to all the complexities of human knowledge and experience, and indeed to rival claims. It is not too strong to say that the message and ministry of Christ must be kept alive in every generation. The church is the only institution in society that is committed to ministry *in the name of Christ*; committed, that is, to the proclamation and interpretation of the Gospel of Christ. The ministry of preaching and witnessing, of relating our faith to the mysteries of human existence in the world, the wonders and ambiguities of human experience in society. . . these are dimensions of Christian ministry, both lay and clergy.

The distinctive ministry of the clergy, then, is "to equip God's people for work in his service." The ministries rendered will be as varied as the work to be done. What we have come to know as the tasks of preaching and teaching, nurture and pastoral care, the leading of worship and the administration of program. . . all are designed to equip the laity for their ministry.

One of the most eloquent statements of this understanding is in Niebuhr's work of two decades ago. His words seem a fitting conclusion to our inquiry.

(The minister's) first function is that of building or "edifying" the church; he is concerned in everything that he does to bring into being a people of God who as a Church will serve the purpose of the Church in the local community and the world. . . The work that lays the greatest claim to his time and thought is the care of a church, the administration of a community that is directed toward the whole purpose of the Church, namely, the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor; for the Church is becoming the minister and its "minister" is its servant, directing it in its service.¹⁵

¹⁵Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.

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