

A Biblical Perspective of Christian Ministry

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[Prepared for WELS Board for Parish Services; Task Force on Alternate Forms of Public Ministry
February 8, 1988]

The Church

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Ro 3:23). But “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst... For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all men” (1 Tm 1:5; 2:5,6). “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Ac 4:12). Jesus himself said, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). There is only one Jesus, one Savior, “one Lord” (Eph 4:5).

“We... know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we too have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law” (G a 2:15,16). “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Those who believe in Jesus are called disciples. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (Jn 8:31). The Bible also calls them Christians. “The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Ac 11:26). In addition they are many times called believers (Jn 4:41; Ac 1:15; 2:44; 4:32; etc.). Other names for those who trust in Jesus for forgiveness are “sons of God” (G a 3:26), “chosen people,” “royal priesthood,” “holy nation,” “a people belonging to God” (1 Pe 2:8), “fellow citizens with God’s people,” “members of God’s household” (Eph 2:19), “sheep,” “flock” (Jn 10:16), the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13,27; Ro 12:4,5; Eph 1:23; 4:4,12,16,25; 5:23,30; Col 1:18,24; 2:19); and saints (Ro 1:7; etc.).

The name that the New Testament uses most often to refer to all believers is church. Church in the Bible never means a building or an organization. Sometimes it is clear that the word church means all those who believe in Jesus. Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18). This is also what Paul means when he says that Jesus’ body is the church (Eph 1:22,23). Sometimes the word church is used in the singular and is mentioned as being in one locality, such as in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and Jesus’ addresses to the churches in Asia Minor in the Book of Revelation. Sometimes the word church is used in the plural and it is clear that more than one group of believers in more than one place is meant. But even in those passages where a church or churches are mentioned in reference to a certain locality, it always seems that the relationship of that specific group to all believers is included in the mention of the word church.

There is only one church, then, in the proper sense, and that is the church of Jesus (Mt 16:18). The church is the body of which Jesus is the head, and in this sense St. Paul writes, “There is one body” (Eph 4:4). Although it is not wrong to speak of a building as a church, or of a group of congregations as a church body, the word church in the proper biblical sense means all of those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

Ministry

Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work” (Jn 9:4). Jesus gave all the believers in his church work to do. He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:18-20). “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mk 16:15). “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8).

The Bible calls the work Jesus gave to his church ministry. Ministry means service. Jesus said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves” (Lk 22:25,26; also Mt 20:26). When Jesus was on earth doing the work he

commanded us, his work was called ministry (Lk 3:23). When believers carry on the work Jesus has given them, the Bible calls this work ministry. St. Paul writes, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18).

The ministry which Jesus has given his church involves the whole life of every believer, his every activity. St. Paul writes, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship” (Ro 12:1). “And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

The most natural part of the believer’s ministry is his desire to tell others what he believes. “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak” (2 Cor 4:13). The confession of a believer’s lips is a partner in ministry with the faith in his heart. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Ro 10:9,10). “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give and answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pe 3:15).

The content of the message every believer brings to the world is the gospel, the good news of salvation in the name of Jesus. The gospel in one sense in the Bible can mean all of the message of the Bible, including the condemnation of the law (Ro 2:16). But almost always in the Bible gospel means specifically the good news of Jesus. The ministry of this gospel was also called the keys by Jesus. Jesus said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19; also Jn 20:21-23; Re 3:7). The keys of the gospel include every believer’s work of baptizing (Mt 28:19-20) and celebrating the Lord’s Supper (Lk 22:19).

Yet Christian ministry includes everything a believer does. His life of good works provides a context for (Mt 5:14-16) and evidence of the power of (2 Cor 3:3; Jas 2:24) the message he is bringing.

Priesthood

The Bible often speaks of Christian ministers as a functioning priesthood. St. Peter tells his readers, “You are... a royal priesthood... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:9). St. John says that Jesus by his saving work has made us priests: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father -to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Re 1:5,6). St. Paul asks that a believer’s life be one of priestly sacrifices. “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (Ro 12:1). “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). “...the gifts you sent...are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God” (Php 4:18). The sacrifices of Christian priesthood do not in any way make payment for sin. Jesus did that. “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy... there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (He 10:13,18). The sacrifices of Christian priesthood are thankofferings (Ro 14:5-8).

We sometimes call the Christian ministry a universal priesthood. That term as such is not found in Scripture, but the concept of the universality is clearly taught. Jesus commands to do ministry were given to all (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Ac 1:8; Mt 16:9; 18:18). By universality we mean that all believers are priests in Christian ministry. St. Peter’s words were addressed to all believers: “You are... a royal priesthood” (1 Pe 2:9). St. John’s words were addressed to all believers: “(Jesus) has made us to be a kingdom and priests” (Re 1:6). The ministry which Jesus has given every Christian as a member of the universal priesthood has also been called lay ministry. Lay ministry is not found in the Bible in the form of a term, but again the Bible clearly teaches that Christian ministry or the functioning of the universal priesthood is lay ministry. Our English word lay comes from the New Testament Greek word for people. Jesus came to make us his people. The angel told Mary, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). It was John the Baptist’s work “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17). The early church spoke of

believers as God's people: "Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself" (Ac 15:14 ; also Ro 9:25; 2 Cor 6:16; Re 21:3).

The Bible makes it clear that it is the work of God's people (laity) to minister. St. Paul writes, "... Jesus Christ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Tt 2:13,14). St. Peter says, "You are... a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God" (1 Pe 2:9,10). Lay ministry, then, is clearly a biblical concept. It is everything every believer does in word or deed as a minister of Jesus. Lay ministry is the whole-life sacrifice offered by every member of the universal priesthood.

Public Ministry

Public ministry is not a term found in the Bible. By public ministry we do not mean ministry which is conducted in view of the public as opposed to that which is conducted in private. We mean ministry which is conducted on behalf of, in the name of, and in the place of other members of the universal priesthood of all believers.

Jesus instituted only one ministry, the ministry of the gospel (Mt 28:18-20; etc.). But it is clear that there is a public aspect of that ministry alongside of the ministry carried out individually by all members of the universal priesthood. It is clear from the Bible, first of all, from the clearly stated need for such public ministry. Paul writes, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Ro 10:14,15).

It is also clear from the Bible that what we call public ministry was intended by Christ to be an aspect of Christian ministry. St. Paul as an apostle of Christ claims that God himself gave him his ministry. He writes, "God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18). Paul frequent calls himself "an apostle of Christ by the will of God" (1 Cor 1:1); "a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Ro 1:1); "an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Ga 1:1)' and "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness" (Tt 1:1). It is clear that although Paul received a direct call from Christ for his work as an apostle he considered others who did not have a direct call from God nevertheless to have been given their public ministry by God. He said to the Ephesian elders, "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood" (Ac 20:28).

That the public ministry is not difference in essence from the ministry which Christ has given to all members of his church can be observed in two way when reading the New Testament. Although the public ministry derives from Christ himself, no separate word of institution is given for public ministry as opposed to the service of the universal priesthood. Also, the Bible gives no duties or forms of service to public ministers which all Christians do not already have.

The public ministry differs from the ministry of all believers only in that it is public. It is carried out on behalf of, in the name of and in the place of other believers. This is clear from the Bible in the many passages which describe public ministry as a service and responsibility for other believers. The public ministry is to be entrusted "to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tm 2:2). They are told, "Be shepherds of the church of God" (Ac 20:28). St. Paul asks, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe" (2 Cor 3:5). Paul was sent out by other Christians (Ac 13:1-3) and he was accountable to the ones who sent him out in their name (Ac 14:26-28; 18:22).

The public ministry does not in any way detract from the ministry of all believers. There is no word of Scripture which says that a public minister relieves or limits the ministry of every priest in the church.

Purpose

The purpose of public ministry is the same as that of the ministry of the priesthood of all believers. The purpose of priestly ministry is to build up the church (Mt 16:18; Ro 15:2; 1 Cor 14:12; 1 Th 5:11; Jd 20). Paul states the purpose of his public ministry as “the authority the Lord gave us for building you up” (2 Cor 10:8). That is the purpose of ministry for all workers in all forms of public ministry. “it was he [Christ] 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 for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).

This purpose of public ministry can also be seen in the many commands in the Bible for public ministers. Jesus told Peter, “Feed my lambs,” “Take care of my sheep,” and, “Feed my sheep” (Jn 21:15-17). Paul told the Ephesians elders, “Be shepherds of the church of God” (Ac20:28). St. Paul instructed Timothy, “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tm 4:13). Most of Paul’s instruction to public servants in his three pastoral epistles is focused on the duties of public servants to care for those who have already come to faith.

Bringing new souls to faith is not an adjunct to caring for the souls of those who already believe. It is a corollary and coincidental purpose of ministry. Soul care presupposes soul winning. Paul speaks of quantitative church building in the same breath as qualitative church building. “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:10,11). Christ’s instituting command for ministry tells us to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). The same teaching of the gospel which builds the church in numbers builds the church in strength.

The Call

The Bible says that no one is to assume the work of public ministry unless he is called by God to do so. Hebrews 5:4 states this truth axiomatically: “No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God.” Jesus personally chose his own disciples to be public ministers. He directly or immediately called Paul to be his apostle to the Gentiles (Ac 9; Eph 3:2-6). But Jesus does not promise to call all public workers directly. In fact no word of Scripture exists which tells us to expect, demand or claim such a call.

Yet God does in fact call all those who serve in public ministry. He usually calls public ministers through the groups of believers whom they serve (Ac 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 14:23; 2 Cor 8:19; Tt 1:5). We know that when groups of Christians choose workers to serve them publicly, this is a call from God himself. The Bible speaks of those chosen by groups of Christians as ones having their call from God (Ac 20:28; 1 Cor 3:5; 4:1; Php 1:1). Because Scripture teaches that the ministry of the gospel has been given only to the church, only groups of believers may call and confer the ministry to public workers.

Since public ministers are called by God through the church they have a double accountability, first to God and then to the calling group. Paul reported back to the church at Antioch which called him (Ac 14:26-28; 18:22), but he knew his primary accountability was to God (1 Cor 4:1-3; 2 Cor 5:11). Every public minister knows when and where his final accounting will be given (He 13:17).

Forms

The ministry Christ gave his church is one ministry. That is the ministry of the gospel, the ministry of the keys. The one office of the ministry is servant (Lk 17:10; Mt 20:27,28; 2 Cor 4:5; 2 Tm 2:24; etc.). The Bible however indicates that there are many forms of public ministry. Many examples of such forms are found in the New Testament. Paul writes, “And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues” (1 Cor 12:28). But the lists of ministry forms are different in different places. To the church in Ephesus Paul writes, “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11). To

the Romans he wrote, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging; let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership; let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully” (Ro 12:6-8).

We may safely draw several conclusions from the forms of public ministry mentioned in the Bible. One, there is no word of institution for any form. No form is said to be a necessary office without which the public ministry is not proper or complete. Two, at the same time in history in congregations served by the same apostle forms varied according to location. This may indicate that the composition of the membership and local traditions played a part in the forms that were developed. Three, congregations are at liberty to choose whatever forms they decide best suit the ministry of the gospel at their location. Four, one of the determining factors in establishing forms was the gifts which individual Christians possessed (Ro 12:6; Eph 4:7,11). Five, another factor which influenced congregations in the development of forms was need (Ac 6:1-6; 2 Cor 8:19; Tt 1:5).

Scope

The forms of ministry of which the Bible speaks seem to have in themselves a generally defined area of responsibility. This seems implicit in many of the names for such forms, such as apostle, elder, teacher, pastor, evangelist, prophet, etc. At the same time not every form of ministry had the same scope.

The apostolate was one form of ministry in the New Testament. Those who were directly chosen by Jesus and had the ability to demonstrate their apostolic office with miracles were accepted as teachers from Christ. Yet there was a difference of scope within the form of the apostolate. St. Paul writes, “I had been given the task of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, just as Peter had been given the task of preaching to the Jews” (G a 2:7; see also v8). Some men who seem not to have the same teaching authority as the ordinary apostles are also given the same name (Ro 16:7). This difference in scope may also be observed in the ministry form of elders. Elders usually are described as having spiritual responsibility connected with the word and doctrine (Ac 15:6,22; 20:17,28; 1 Tm 4:14; Jas 5:14), but this is not always the case (1 Tm 5:17).

As is the case with the form of public ministry, the scope of the form is defined by the calling group (Ac 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 2 Cor 8:19). But circumstances may also at times change the scope somewhat (Ac 18:6).

Qualifications

The Bible demands high spiritual qualities in the men and women who are called to public ministry. A basic requirement of those in public ministry is the evidence of their personal faith in lifestyle. Paul writes of the qualifications of the overseer: “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (1 T m 5:2-7; see also Tt 1:7,8). Personal character and reputation are essential qualifications for all public ministry. The deacons chosen at Jerusalem to wait on tables were men “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Ac 6:3). Paul sent a worker to help with the offering at Corinth who was “praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel” (2 Cor 8:18). The requirements for deacons also included matters of personal character. They were to be “men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain” (1 T m 3:8).

Along with qualities of personality and lifestyle called workers must possess a knowledge of Scripture. “They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 T m 3:9). “He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Tt 1:9). Continuing study and growth in the knowledge of the Bible is required alongside of initial knowledge and training. Paul told Timothy, “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and become convinced of, because you know those from whom you have learned it” (2 T m 3:14). Although

Apollos “was a learned man, with a knowledge of the Scriptures,” Priscilla and Aquilla “explained to him the way of God more adequately” (Ac 18:24,26) before he went to Corinth.

Another quality of called workers is their reliability. Paul sent a brother to work in Corinth of whom he said that he “has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous” (2 Cor 8:22). For this reason Timothy was told than an overseer “must not be a recent convert.” Even of deacons it was required that “They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons” (1 Tm 3:10). Experience in called workers is desirable because “Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus” (1 Tm 3:13). The urgency of needs and circumstances should not pressure groups of believers into relaxing these requirements in those they call to public ministry. Paul said to Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tm 5:22).

Many other qualities of public ministers are mentioned in Scripture, but one in particular is mentioned more frequently than others. That is the ability of a called worker to weather adversity. Paul encouraged Timothy, “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs—he wants to please his commanding officer. Similarly if one competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor’s crown unless he competes according to the rules. The hardworking farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops” (2 Tm 2:3-7; also 2 Cor 4:7-12; 11:23-33; 1:3-7; etc.).

Women’s Roles

Many women in the New Testament were a part of the public ministry of the church. Phoebe is called “a servant of the church in Cenchrea” in Romans 16:1. Priscilla participated with Aquila in explaining “the way of God more adequately” to Apollos (Ac 18:26). Philip the evangelist “had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy” (Ac 21:9). The names of a number of women are mentioned in Romans 16 whose work for the Lord may have been a form of public ministry.

Jesus’ word of institution for ministry pertains to all Christians, male and female. There is no word of God in the Bible which limits public ministry to men or denies the office of ministry to women.

The Bible does, however, speak of a role relationship between men and women which affects in some circumstances the form of ministry which women may assume, or in some circumstances the scope of their ministry within certain forms. In Genesis 2:7 and 2:22 God teaches by chronology that man was created first and woman second. St. Paul by inspiration teaches that a moral application may be made from this truth. In 1 Timothy 2:11,12, Paul writes, “A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent.” As a basis for this command Paul gives as one reason, “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tm 2:13). Paul then adds, “And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner” (v14). Paul does not mention this as a reflection upon the nature of a woman which disqualifies her for ministry. He is making a comment of what happens when the role relationship is ignored.

In Genesis 2:18 Moses says that God made woman “for” the man. In verse 24 Moses says that woman was created “from” man. In 1 Corinthians 11 St. Paul uses these truths as the basis for making an application to a situation in Corinth (vv8,9). Although Paul’s application to the situation in Corinth may not find parallel application today (1 Cor 11:16), the principle (“the head of the woman is man”—v3) is the same.

Thus the Bible teaches that women have the privilege of ministry and public ministry alongside men. No restriction of ministry may be applied to women on the basis of personal ability or spiritual value. For women and men alike were created in the image of God (Gn 1:27; Ga 3:28; 1 Pe 3:7). The role principle does apply, however, when a form of ministry necessarily includes authority over men. The principle applies to the scope of a form of ministry when the form itself may or may not include authority over men.

Perception

The image of the New Testament minister is derived primarily from the word ministry itself. The word for ministry comes from the Greek word for the work or service of waiting on tables (Ac 1:17,25; 6:4; 12:25; 20:4; 21:19; 2 Cor 4:1; etc.). It is instructive that the same root word is used in Acts 6:1-6 for the ministry of the

deacons who were chosen to wait on tables as is used for the work of those who were relieved by this service to give their attention to “the ministry of the word” (Ac 6:4). An even stronger word which actually means slave is often translated servant in reference to those who serve in the public ministry (Php 1:1; Tt 1:1; etc.) and those who serve God as members of the universal priesthood (Eph 6:6; 1 Pe 2:16; Re 7:3).

Other perceptions of public ministers include those of messenger (Re 2,3), fishermen (Mk 1:17,18; Mt 4:19; Lk 5:10), shepherd or pastor (Eph 4:11), witness (Ac 1:8,22), vessel (Ac 9:15; 2 Cor 4:7), fellow worker (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1; 3 Jn 8), stewards (1 Cor 4:1), ambassador (2 Cor 5:20; Eph 6:19), prisoner of Jesus Christ (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2 Tm 1:8; Phm 1,9), pattern (1 Tm 1:16; Tt 2:7), soldier (2 Tm 2:3), and farmer or husband man (2 Tm 2:6).

Recompense

What called ministers may expect as a reward for their service is given much space in Scripture. The ones they serve owe them honor and obedience. “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you” (He 13:7). “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (He 13:17). There is a degree of honor due public servants according to the form of their ministry: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tm 5:17).

The honor which is given to public ministers, at least those who serve in some forms of it, includes provision for material needs. Paul tells Timothy, “For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (1 Tm 5:18). He tells the Galatian congregations, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor” (Ga 6:6). The Bible does not say that all forms of ministry must be remunerated with material provision. There is no example or command about full time vis a vis part time ministry.

A public minister’s full reward is the confidence in Christ he possesses in this life and the sure hope of life in heaven (1 Cor 9:27). Paul says, “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php 1:20). In spite of many physical afflictions Paul states of himself and his coworkers, “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven” (2 Cor 5:1).

The laying on of hands

There are a number of examples of and references to a ceremony of the laying on of hands in the New Testament. This was a ceremony conducted at the beginning of a public ministers service after he was chosen for that ministry by a group of believers. After the believers in Jerusalem had chosen their deacons, “They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Ac 6:6). After the congregation at Antioch had chosen Paul for his missionary work, “they fasted and prayed,” and then “they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Ac 13:3). Paul makes reference to this ceremony when he tells Timothy, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands” (1 Tm 5:22).

Although the Bible gives us examples of and references to the ceremony of the laying on of hands, there is no command of Scripture that we must conduct such a ceremony for public workers after they are called. In liberty we have the custom of conducting ceremonies of ordination and installation for public ministers when they begin their ministry or when they begin their service for another group of believers. Although the Bible states that the ceremony of the laying on of hands was performed for public ministers, it does not say that such ceremonies were conducted for every form of public ministry. The church is free to use or not to use similar ceremonies for public ministers. The church is free to use such ceremonies for some forms of public ministry and not for others.

The Bible says that the ceremony of the laying on of hands was accompanied by prayer (Ac 6:6), fasting (Ac 13:3) and “prophetic message” (1 Tm 4:14). The purpose of the ceremony seems to have been public

acknowledgement of their ministry and commendation to God. (Ac 6:6; Ac 14:26). Those who teach that ordination is a necessary rite or sacrament have also taught that the laying on of hands in itself confers a spiritual gift for ministry that is lacking without this ceremony. They have based this on Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:6: "Fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands." But the gift which Timothy received and the means by which he received that gift becomes clear in a parallel passage in 1 Timothy 4:14: "Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you." The gift which Timothy received is that which all ministers of Christ are promised in the word. That gift is the abiding presence of Christ (Mt 28:20), the keys of the kingdom (Mt 16:19), the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22,23), the word of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:19,20), the right words to say at the right time (Lk 21:15; Mt 10:19,20).

Summary Conclusions

Jesus is the world's only Savior from sin. Those who accept Jesus by faith are saved. Church is the Bible's name for all those who believe in Jesus. Even though the word church is used sometimes to mean some of those who believe in Jesus, there is only one church.

Jesus has given every member of his church work to do. This work the Bible calls ministry, or service. Jesus assigned this work to the members of his church when he told them to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. Every believer performs this ministry by everything he does in life, both in words and actions. This work of the church is also called the ministry of the keys, because Jesus said that by their preaching of the gospel believers had the power to open and close the door of heaven for those who receive their ministry.

Every member of Jesus' church is a priest in the New Testament sense of the word. This means that every believer offers sacrifices, not to pay for sins, but to give thanks to God that Jesus has offered the perfect sacrifice for his sins. The priesthood of all believers is what we call the universal priesthood. The work of Christian priests who sacrifice their words and actions in thanksgiving to God is called lay ministry. We get the word lay from the Bible's word for people. The Bible says that believer priests are the people of God.

When a believer priest carries out his ministry for Christ he functions on his own to the world into which Christ sent him. When a priest carries out ministry on behalf of other believers we call his ministry public ministry. That there is a public ministry coincident with the ministry of individual priests is clear from the need which the Bible establishes for such ministry and from the fact that public ministers are said to have been given to their form of ministry by Christ himself. The public ministry and the ministry of individual priests is the same ministry. It has the same institution by Christ and it has the same purposes. There is no word of institution for public ministry apart from the institution of the ministry of the universal priesthood.

Because there is only one ministry for Christ's church, and that is to bring the gospel to the world, there is only one office of ministry, and that is minister of the gospel. This ministry, however, may take many forms. No single form has been established by Scripture as an office which must be filled by the church. The church has complete freedom in establishing forms. The New Testament groups of believers established forms of ministry in response to specific needs. The church chose workers to fill forms of ministry which they established. We say that a church which chooses public ministers calls those ministers.

The Bible requires high spirituality in all public ministers, including those who will not be directly working with the word of God. Since no forms of ministry are commanded by Christ, no form of ministry is to be denied women except those which by their nature or function include authority over men.

All members of Christ's church are to honor public ministers. This honor may include the necessity of providing material and physical support. God himself will reward public ministers and all believers with heaven.

Observations

It is obvious from New Testament Scripture that there can be many alternate forms of ministry to the forms of pastor and teacher. What is significant in the New Testament is that these forms invariably developed on the congregational level. There seem to be some forms such as elder, deacon, overseer and perhaps teacher which were fairly common to all congregations. But beyond these, we note many different forms. The development of these “alternate” forms of ministry came about because congregations understood the freedom they had in this matter and because they exercised this freedom in their determination to carry out the church’s mission.

This might be a cue for the church today. What is needed first is the building up of the church to understand its mission. What is needed second is the specific instruction for our congregations in regard to the freedom to establish forms of ministry. The synod, of course, is also the church, and it may recognize needs and understand its mission very well. But until individual congregations better understand mission and ministry, it will be difficult to convince them of the necessity and utilization of new forms.

The synod’s own understanding of the nature of public ministry might be of some help in this direction. Noteworthy in the New Testament is the fact that not all public ministers were directly involved in the ministry of the word. Ministry by biblical definition is everything done in support of the gospel. Public ministry, then, is every kind of work done in support of the gospel in the name of, on the behalf of, and in the place of other believers. Waiting on tables (Ac 6:2), administration (1 Cor 12:28; 1 T m 5:17) and helping to gather offerings (2 Cor 8:19) is also the work of public ministry. Our tradition of considering only pastors and teachers to be public ministers in the proper sense because they work with the word may need some revision.

Another interesting aspect of New Testament ministry is the contrast between the freedom in establishing alternate forms of ministry and the stringent requirements for qualification for all forms of ministry. The fact that high spirituality, knowledge of the word of God and demonstrated ability and patience in adversity are required of all public servants, regardless of whether they work directly with the word, is a matter that needs careful consideration by congregations, educational institutions and administration. Ongoing study of Scripture as a part of public ministry professionalism in all forms needs to be encouraged.

The often quoted words of our fathers, “The gospel creates its own forms,” is what gives balance and perspective to a Bible study of ministry. Everything the New Testament says about vigorous churches and developing forms of ministry was done in the context of vigorous preaching and evangelizing. Forms did not invigorate apathetic congregations. The gospel created a caring church, and the caring church freely created forms as they saw the need.