

## Ministry, A Look Into the New Year



The question for us on this last Sunday of the year is "What is the challenge for the Church?" It is not, "What is the challenge for the nation." Two thousand years ago it would not have been, "What is the challenge for the Roman Empire." The question for every visionary experience, every Jordan River moment, is, "What is the challenge for the church."

**Ministry is the great and grand purpose of the church.** The word minister has the meaning of giving service, care, and aid to others, as well as the idea of comforting and attending. This we are to do as followers of Christ. In the church, leadership is the opposite of what it is in the world. "But whoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28).

The word minister is used 93 times in the Bible, while the word ministry is used 22 times. By that, you can bet it is a central theme. Paul thought of himself as a "minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles" (Romans 15:16); he also went to "Jerusalem to minister unto the saints" (Romans 15:25). Timothy was called a "good minister of Jesus Christ" (1 Timothy 4:6) --as were others. Epaphras was called a "faithful minister of Christ" (Col. 1:7).

Most of what Jesus did on earth can be described by the word *ministry*. In his great intercessory prayer, Jesus prayed, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one" (John 17:15). "As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17:18). Jesus talked about the church doing "greater works" than he. He promised to equip it for "every good work," and to send his Holy Spirit to his church. The Holy Spirit would then give gifts to the church to equip it for the task of ministry ahead.

The ministry of the church is not easy, nor is it free; ministry costs in every way. Ministry requires the one ministering to grow and to exercise. Ministry is not done without effort. Every time I go into Wendy's, I think, "Boy, do I miss Dave Thomas." We all understood what Dave meant when he said, "Do you know what I like about exercise? I like it when it's over." Well, Dave, it can't stop for ever.

Ministry is necessary because the church is constantly growing, and healing, and repairing itself. In Hebrews 6:1, the preacher proposed that we get on with the ministry --that we build the building. Let's not just sit here, everyone looking at the foundation. Of course, the foundation is Jesus Christ. But what Paul had in mind was that we are saved to serve. Enter to worship - Depart to serve; that is the church. We are saved to build a spiritual church building upon this foundation of Jesus Christ. He didn't mean to leave Jesus Christ; he meant, rather, that we ought to get on with the job. As important as it is to be "born again," or "receive Christ," or "drink of the living water," or be "saved," or "trust Christ," or "rise up and walk," or "have faith," or become a Christian -- or however you like to say it, it is not necessary to be born again, and again, and again, and again. So, we must "follow Christ" in ministry.

It's a wonderful foundation; however, our job is to get on with it, to build upon it --not just to stand there looking. Why? Because, if we have received Christ, we are already saved --we already have the foundation. Why do

people like to "do the foundation" again and again? Simple, it's the easy part --Jesus did it. Simple, it's the free part --Jesus paid it. And we know it.

But who is to work at the rest of the building? "If any man build" (1 Corinthians 3:12). You cannot lay a different foundation; Jesus already put down the foundation for the church (1 Corinthians 3:11). So why don't more people build? Well, look at what we are expected to build with, "gold, silver, precious stones" (1 Corinthians 3:12). We are to give our best in ministry --who wants to give his or her best?

At this point, people think about the offering plate, missions, outreach, and so forth. However, God asks us to think about ourselves. "Do you not know that **you are God's temple** (his church, his building) and that God's Spirit dwells in you" (1 Corinthians 3:16)? Think of *yourself* when you think about building the church. *Outreach* is directly dependent upon *in-reach*. The world will never believe in a God who has no power in the hearts of individual people. What we say with our mouths carries no weight if we do not say it with our lives, in ministry, as we live in the world. So, Jesus prayed, that **we would remain here "so that** the world may believe that you have sent me." What is there about us that would convince anyone? **Think of yourself when you think of building the church; you are the church.**

**Ministry requires growth, and the development of Christian skills.** For this reason, Paul wrote, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness" (Hebrews 5:12,13). "Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation" (Hebrews 6:1).

God is anxious for us to grow up; he is anxious for us to move on from our birth. Salvation is *becoming a Christian*; after that, there is *being a Christian*. To be a Christian is to function as a minister. Without this, few people will want to become Christians. It takes but a moment to become a Christian; that is not the hard part. It is the lifetime afterward that is the hard part. More people need to be dedicated to helping people *be Christian* after they become Christians.

There must be many Apollos in the church, watering, nurturing, encouraging, and building. Too often, we plant seed and leave it to die. This "pulling back" from ministry, this regression to childhood, is an effort to avoid adult Christian responsibility. It is refusing to face the real issues of living the Christian life --and of "growing-up". It is refusing to mow the lawn, take out the trash, do the dishes, make the beds, and generally keep up the Christian housekeeping of our own lives. Instead we get stuck on "It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair --like a baby.

Of course, it is all done in honor of the foundation --this regression, this moving back away from adult Christian responsibilities. We say we are honoring Christ when we say, "Look at the bare foundation." While Christ is the foundation upon which we are to begin and base Christian ministry; still, we must build!

**Paul gives another picture of us when we refuse to grow up and go to work.** "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations" (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)? Why don't people move on? Simple, look what is involved; we must break away from the natural, the normal, the babyish --that is, envy, strife, and tantrum. We must give up on always having our own way. It wasn't fair for Jesus; so what makes you so special?

You cannot accomplish much with such inclinations. To minister and build for Christ, folk must see themselves as "laborers together" for Christ. They must have tolerance, patience, respect for others, humility, and understanding --which is all tough stuff. These things bring us together; you cannot be an adult Christian alone. The Holy Spirit must be allowed to work in his temple.

The proof is in the pudding; so, the proof of God is the adult Christian. "And be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:2). The question asked by those who look for God has always been, "Does God make real Christians? If so, I'd like to see one." "Show me a real Christian, one that is really trying." "Show me a Christian engaged in sincere ministry." "Don't show me another evangelist in his thousand dollar tailor-cut suit and his Jaguar; don't show me another Christian 'wheeler-dealer,' 'razzle-dazzle,' show me another Mother Teresa." It is true that we all come short; but, we cannot always use that as an excuse for not trying. You can only go so far with the "none of us are perfect" excuse.

The church has had much less difficulty with preaching, than with ministering. Ministering is where we *apply* faith in life service. There is a story that goes like this: Morning had come in the little cottage of Hiram and Elizabeth. Elizabeth called Hiram, "Hiram, it's time to get up and go to work." Hiram replied, "I can't get up." Elizabeth asked, "Why?" Hiram said, "Because, Elizabeth, I'm dead." "But Hiram, you'll be late for work." Hiram then said, "Dead men don't go to work." This went on for some time and Elizabeth called the doctor who promptly went in and stuck Hiram with a needle. Hiram yelled. The doctor said, "Hiram, you're not dead; dead men don't feel."

Perhaps the preacher's job is like that --always waking the dead, and "pricking the conscience," as it were. Most people would rather talk than work, and you really can't blame them; for, talking is much easier. But, in the church, the preacher must be saying, "Let's build a life on this foundation." Understandably, people don't always like that. Who really likes to go to work on themselves? So we squirm and wiggle, and say, "Let's talk about it."

Why don't more people become Christians? Is it an intellectual problem? Is the gospel of Christ too complicated? Or is it generally not available? Actually, people know more than you think they know. "The law of God is written in their hearts and consciences" (Romans 2:15). "Who, knowing the judgment of God" (Roman 1:32). "That which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has shown it unto them" (Romans 1:19).

***People know more about God than what we give them credit for.*** There is little accomplished by letting them make us dance all around the intellectual may pole. They know about God from nature, and from their consciences. But how are these things aroused? How do you get Hiram out of bed? Here is a suggestion from Peter to wives who have nonresponsive husbands; it is a suggestion that will work for anyone. He says that when people will not listen, we are to stop our talking, but, continue with our Christian living (our ministry), even the more, and they will get the gospel message from that alone. People need to see what it is that we are building on this foundation. It is as my Uncle Bob said when he called on the phone one day, "Ken, I want you to know that I decided to become a Christian --and it had nothing to do with you and all of you talking. It was your Aunt Ruth; I've lived with her for 40 years --and I know she is real." "So, now you can leave me alone?"

"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we assimilate Christ, we begin to reflect him. People, then, see Jesus Christ in us.

I was once the assistant minister in a church in Binghamton, New York. The people in that church were all professing Christians. You could doubt the profession of some of them if you like --they doubted each other.

Yet, the preacher made it his habit to dip that entire congregation into hell every Sunday morning. His main sermon was a variation of explaining Dante's painting of the "Inferno." Over and over, he gave what he called the gospel, as if they were a group of simpletons. Eventually, he ran off with the soloist, with whom he was having an affair, and the church was spared further ordeal.

So, we must get on with ministry and living; we must be convinced that "poor living" will ruin God's work. If we are not what we should be, people will suffer --no matter how well we talk.

***Now, we all fall short, and we know that. But, God has given us some tools for that, and if we use them, people will understand.*** He has given us humility, forgiveness, and repentance. We don't have to be stuck with what we are; it is OK to change our minds about things. Why does everything we have done in the past have to be right? Parents give up the best tool they have for raising adolescent children when they insist that they know what they are doing. Parents, one of the best defenses you have is to plead ignorance. When you get to those difficult issues, tell them you're scared, you haven't had a course in parenting, and that you had no parenting experience when they came out of the womb. You'll be surprised, they will work with you, so long as you're not a "know it all."

If you use these tools you can even get away with the dumb things that you did when you were a kid growing up. The kids are sure to bring them up. But, what good will it do if you say, "Yes, I did that but I was wrong and stupid?" These tools work. Try humility --pride won't buy you a candy bar.

***The best way for the church to demonstrate Christ is to build something good on the foundation. Something that rises high in the sky and points toward God.*** You are the temple of God. He lives in you. Christ will be apparent to others as they see the fruits of his work in your life. "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). That is what growing-up is about. Unfortunately, some people have gotten the idea that growing is about becoming the "boss cow," or a "holy Joe," or a "super saint, or the "Christian Warrior" --out to club evil to death." Just hope that they don't decide that you are the devil. Too many people set out to build "religious empires," when that ought to just "do the work of ministry" --of "caring for," "caring about." Apply it to yourself first.

Ministry comes from the heart and it is humble. Ministers are willing to go to small places. It's not a program; it's not entertainment; it's not a show; it's not a circus come to town --ministry is you. "Therefore, seeing we have this *ministry*, as we have received mercy, we faint not" (2 Corinthians 4:1). "All things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and has given us the *ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Corinthians 5:18). "As every one has received the gift, even so *minister* the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). Stewards of what? The grace of God.

In this year that lies ahead, there will be more need for the work of the church than ever before. There will be a need for comforters. There will be a need for healers. There will be a need for reconcilers. There will be a need for peacemakers. There will be a need for builders. The work set before the church is different and it is difficult --and it is rewarding. Some of us may work longer than we thought --but, why does God give us life? Why?

When you think of the work of the church don't think of Robert E. Lee or Ulysses S. Grant --think of Clara Barton and her Red Cross. Healing comes one bandage at a time.

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