

Our Reasonable Service: the Scope of Ministry in the Body of Christ

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Many of today's churches and Christian leaders get hung up on the word "ministry." It is not that they do not know or understand the meaning of the term, but rather that they have their own ideas and traditions as to how ministry should be conducted within and by the *ecclesia* (the church or assembly). This is reminiscent of Jesus' day in which Jerusalem, temple, and covenant worship had become corrupted by the power-hungry priesthood and religious leaders of Israel.

One group, known as the Pharisees, had been responsible for inventing and prescribing extra scriptural rituals and rules as sacraments by which they intended to erect a "wall of safety" around the Old Testament Law (also called the Mosaic Law and the Law of Moses) in order to help prevent the people from breaking God's commands. The chief priests and elders of Israel lived the high life off of the tithes and offerings of the people and having prominent influence with their Roman rulers, who had charged them to govern religious affairs and to keep the people in line. Some of the religious leaders even questioned Jesus concerning some of these customs which He and His disciples did not observe.

Matthew chapter 15 tells of some Pharisees and scribes (or rabbis—teachers) who approached Jesus and asked Him why He and His disciples "transgress[ed] the traditions of the elders" by not ceremoniously baptizing their hands before eating. Jesus responded by pointing out one of their concocted rules which the elders of Israel had invented that provides a loop hole for honoring one's father and mother. Jesus scolded them saying,

Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition. Hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy about you saying, "These people draw near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me," and, "in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of

men.”

So, the Lord makes it obvious, then, just how God feels about men inventing their own religions and sacraments (religious rituals) around the commandments of God and teaching them as if they were equal to God’s word.

Many of today’s so-called churches do not fit the biblical model of the New Testament Church. The Greek word in the New Testament translated “church” is *ecclesia*, which means “the gathering of the called ones” or “the assembly of the elect.” In examining the history and scope of the true Christian church, the biblical church can be seen to have several basic functions. The first function to which God’s church was called is evangelism. This was the very function which Jesus used to build His church, and it is also the function which keeps it alive. Let us look at the evangelical beginnings of the church from each of the four gospels and from the *Acts of the Apostles*.

Each of the four Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, record Jesus’ final instructions to His disciples after rising from the dead and before He ascended into Heaven. Matthew records Jesus as commanding His disciples, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20). In Mark, Jesus is quoted as saying, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. and these signs will follow those who believe: in My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mark 16:15-18). It can be seen that, in both quotations, Jesus is saying the exact same thing, “Go into all the world, preaching the gospel, baptizing new disciples and teaching them everything I have told you, and I will be with you, working in you, confirming your word through miraculous, supernatural signs” (paraphrase). Luke’s version records Jesus explaining the very gospel which He was commissioning His disciples to preach and informing them that they will receive

“power from on high” to equip them for such a task.

Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:46-49).

John simply records Jesus telling His disciples, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you,” and then breathing on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). He continued to say, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (vv. 23).

These four passages are all records of one event commonly known as the Great Commission. These are Jesus’ marching orders for His church. When seen together as a single event and cross-referenced for interpretational purposes, it is evident what Jesus meant in each quote from each author. After all, Jesus was giving these orders as His final instructions to His disciples before He ascended back into Heaven to sit at the right hand of God’s might; He intended for them to be understood. One can see that in each of the four accounts Jesus is first sending His disciples out to evangelize the world with the good news of His resurrection and kingdom. Both Matthew and Mark have Jesus using the imperative, “Go,” (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15) while in Luke Jesus merely describes what the gospel message is, His own crucifixion and resurrection so “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem,” (Luke 24:46-47) which is exactly what unfolds in the book of Acts, which Luke is also widely believed to have written. In John, Jesus told His disciples that He was sending them just as the Father had sent Him (John 20:22).

These accounts are not in conflict with one another, but rather provide four different human perspectives on the work of God through Jesus Christ and the order for

the church to continue His work. They are all brought together descriptively for everyone to see in Luke's record of the *Acts of the Apostles*. For example, Jesus' instructions for each new disciple to be baptized in Matthew and Mark corresponds with the instruction for the disciples to preach "repentance and remission of sins" in Luke 24:47 and either forgive or retain people's sins as recorded in John 20:23. This shows that Christian baptism is synonymous with Jesus plan for the forgiveness and remission of sins for all people and is summed up in Peter's first preaching of this good news after Jesus' ascension and the infilling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Luke records this sermon in Acts chapter two. The cry of those who heard Peter's preaching about how they had killed God's Messiah but He had risen from the dead as they pleaded with the apostles was this, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37), and Peter's response and call to salvation is given in verses 38 and 39:

Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."

God's true church is this very group of people which began on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts the second chapter and continues to remain faithful to its biblical foundations of the gospel, water baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and the in-filling of the Holy Spirit and presence of God as the consummate gift of salvation which sets Christians apart from non-Christians. Any true church today will be modeled after the biblical ecclesia which "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42), wrought "many wonders and signs" (v. 43), "were together and had all things in common" (v. 44), "sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (v. 45), while "continuing daily with one accord" and "breaking bread from house to house," eating "their food with gladness and simplicity of heart" (v. 46), and were "praising God and having favor with all the people" (v. 47).

If this is not how a so-called church operates today in any culture across the globe, then it is truly not a Christian assembly and most likely can trace its roots back to the heresy of Catholicism which began in pagan Rome and became the empire's official religion, declaring itself the only truth with threats of violence against all those who speak against them. Contrary to popular culture religion scholars, the true church which began on the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 and was persecuted by Rome, its contemporary governments and religious systems, and the later Protestant denominations which stemmed from Martin Luther and John Calvin survived despite all of the satanic attempts to thwart God's true redemptive plan and work. God's true assembly survives to this day because of His sovereign power revealed in Jesus' declaration in Matthew 16:18, "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it."

After the establishment of the church, it remained an evangelistic organization. After Peter's first gospel sermon in Jerusalem "three thousand souls were added" (Acts 2:41), "and the Lord added to the church daily" (v. 47). A similar course of events took place in Acts 3, on the second day of the church's life and at least another two thousand men came to know the Lord Jesus (Acts 4:4). Throughout the book of Acts the church was growing as people were being convinced that Jesus is Lord and being baptized in His name and filled with His Spirit. Evangelism, as Jesus spelled it out in the Great Commission, is the number one calling upon Christ's church. Through evangelism men and women who are sons and daughters of God bring into the church those who are without hope and without God in the world. The doors are always open. Outsiders become insiders, and those who were estranged from God become His beloved children through the provisional sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, the preaching of the gospel, and by the "washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Therefore, just as Jesus lives, so the people of God are to put off their former evil deeds of the flesh (Colossians 2:11-15) and walk in the newness of a resurrection life (Romans 6:4).

The new life of the disciple of Christ consists of learning to live and walk in the strength of God's Spirit and not in the weakness of the flesh. The church's second major

function is to ensure the growth and development of the children of God. Just as parents oversee, teach, guide, and love their own children, God has a higher calling for everyone who is a Christian to have a part in the leadership, administration, teaching, guiding, and loving of His church. Paul wrote that the five-fold ministry leaders of the church, apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11), were given by God for two reasons. The second reason listed was to ensure the growth of the children of God into mature, stable adults who measure up to the perfect standard of Jesus Christ (vv. 13-15). Next, the first reason given was to equip the saints for ministry work (v. 12). Therefore, there are two kinds of ministry which followers of Jesus Christ are called to perform, internal or body ministry, and external ministry or evangelism (discussed previously). The role of leaders and experienced ministers is to strengthen and equip the saints (or church members) for their respective ministries.

Body ministry is ministry done by a Christian or group of Christians on behalf of other Christians. This could include a song, a hymn, a prayer, a teaching, a prophesy, a healing, a miracle, a discerning of spirits, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation of tongues, etc. (Ephesians 5:19 & I Corinthians 12:8-10; 14:26). Paul said, “Whenever you come together... let all these things be done for edification” (14:26). A true assembly of Christians is one in which believers are ministering to one another in this way. Believers should be experiencing freedom from both sin as they grow in and follow Christ. James 5:16 says, “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed,” and I John 1:9 states, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Finally, the Scriptures cited above demonstrate that every Christian has at least two ministries, one to those outside the church and one to those inside the church. The Christian’s ministry to those who are outside must be mostly evangelistic, continuously admonishing and urging them to come to Christ. Ministry to other Christians is discipleship, exhorting and equipping one another toward Christlikeness. So let us obey the command of the Lord Jesus in the Great Commission and make disciples His way.