

Abstract: My theology of ministry is dependent upon my view of God and three characteristics of God. God is love, holy, and relational. My view of ministry also rests on the idea that we are all disciples first and that each person has their own ministry, even if they are not a formal minister. Ministers help each person become aware of their ministry and invest in them to help them use their gifts and passions for God. Youth and family ministry places a value on adolescents and families and is constantly helping them navigate transitions.

My theology of ministry is grounded in my understanding of who God is. There are three particular aspects of God's character that are key in how I see God. First, God is love. Love is not just an emotion that God experiences or expresses. It is his identity, according to 1 John 4:16. 1 Corinthians 13 is widely known for its description of love and many people have substituted God's name for the word love in that passage to talk about how God loves us. And while that is a wonderful chapter, the whole Bible is filled with stories, descriptions, ideas, and actions to convey how God loves us and how much God loves us. If God were not love, he would not be the God who continually returns to a people who are constantly forsaking him for some shinier or more ravishing "deity". He would not have sent his one and only son, who was always obedient and engaged in a relationship with the Father, to earth and to die for really disobedient and distant people. He would not have punished, rebuked, instructed, or protected people who seem ungrateful and ignorant of the ways he invests in their lives. He would not be the God we know or read about in the Old or the New Testaments.

Yet he does love and he is love and while we cannot fully understand it or why he does it, we can have faith that he does and that he desires for us to love him, love ourselves, and love others. On a rare occasion when Jesus straightforwardly answers a question, he tells his audience that the two greatest commandments are to love God with everything you have and to love other

people like we love ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-31). Similarly after Jesus washes his disciples' feet, he gives them a new command and tells them to love each other in the way that he has loved them and to let that love be the mark of discipleship (John 13:34-35). The only way we can know what love is or how to love ourselves or others is to embrace God's love.

The second key characteristic of God is that he is holy. He is different from anyone and anything else that we could possibly worship or idolize. He is sinless, perfect, just, and righteous yet also gracious and merciful. How his holiness matches up with some of the Bible stories that show his wrath or even his mercy can be hard to understand. Yet both the Old and New Testaments acknowledge that he is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45; 20:26; Psalm 99:3, 5, 9; 1 Peter 1:15-16) and both call us to be holy like he is and because he is (Leviticus 11:44-45; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:15-16). While God is holy he knows that we are not and that we cannot be so on our own. But he still calls us to be holy which seems to imply that with his help he thinks we can become holier than what we are right now. This is a part of ministry, becoming holy like God and helping others to do the same because this is what we are called to be.

The third key characteristic is that God is relational. Our God is one god but at the same time distinctly three entities. The Godhead is relational by definition and this divine relationship overflowed into creation. He created us to be relational, to be in community with each other. Ministry occurs in the context of community. It is good for us to have times of solitude and to be alone with God but it is also good for us to come back to the body of Christ. Jesus modeled this for us; he spent time alone with God then went with his disciples to preach and heal people (Mark 1:35-39). Jesus has community and relationships on varying levels – he had his followers, then a smaller group of specifically chosen disciples, and an even smaller group of his closest disciples. There might have been a way for Jesus to come to the world and save us quickly or

without having to interact with too many people. But what he did was to spend years walking along side people and building relationships with them before he died for them and us. And once he rose from the grave, he appeared to people he had relationships with to continue his ministry and commission them. God is relational and created us to be relational and the model of ministry that Jesus gives us is relational as well.

Ministry requires humility. Those in ministry positions, formal or informal, must never forget that the people they are ministering to are disciples, just like them. This is an idea that really stuck with me after reading Cahalan's book in Foundations last fall. The basis of ministry is not a hierarchical relationship of a better person helping lesser people; it is a disciple walking with other disciples. When we forget that we are disciples, we focus too much on the people we are serving and forget to take care of our own relationship with God. This can lead to burnout, arrogance, relationship problems, and ministry problems. We are not the be all, end all of Christians when we become ministers. We are walking the same journey with the same Christ as everyone else. Our ministry needs to overflow from our own discipleship and relationship with God. If it does not, it is overflowing only from us and we cannot save people.

Another part of my theology of ministry is perhaps true of any kind of ministry but is especially true to how I see my ministry and why I want to be in ministry. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, I cannot do it all. I am a finite human being which means I have a limited amount of time, energy, and gifts. My impact will only reach so many people. That is true of everyone but not everyone invests in or pays attention to the impact they can have on the people around them. I view my role as a minister, especially a youth minister, to help other disciples become aware of the opportunities they have to bless and serve other people. I have a handful of gifts but the number of gifts that exist in my youth group are much greater. If I can help students

and parents recognize their gifts and passions and how those can fit within the Kingdom, I can help them make the most of their impact potential. I believe every Christian is a minister, at least in the sense that we are all capable of loving and serving other people. My job as an official minister is to help other ministers find their ministry in life. I view ministry as investing in other people so that they can go to places and do things with and for people that I may not be called to do. When I view ministry in this way, my impact circle grows because it is not just about the people in front of me but also the people in front of them.

There are two related components to how I view youth and family ministry. These are the importance of adolescents and the importance of family. Culture tends to tell us that being young is the best thing but also that young people are irresponsible and are the future rather than the present. Being a teenager is a challenging thing in our culture because it is this weird phase where you are both a child and an adult and you gradually leave one behind to fully enter the other. Adolescents are learning to think for themselves and growing in responsibility and capabilities. And I think that can be a crucial time to help them find God, follow God, and grow close to God. There is no need to wait for them to grow up to be “useful” to the Church; they are useful now if we invest in them and challenge them to invest in us. They should not be written off or given low expectations. If we want them to continue to be a part of the Church we need to let them know that they are worthwhile and part of a bigger picture. Often times people get used to having ministries centered around them because it is what they are used to when they were children and teenagers and sometimes even when they are college students. We need to be able to connect them to a bigger concept of what the body of Christ is and what it means to be in a relationship with God rather than perpetuate the notion that they are at the center of everything.

Similarly families are valuable. Churches tend to buy into the idea that families are good and useful but they do not always know how to best prepare the whole family and not just the children. We tend to separate out each family member to a ministry catered to them, which has its benefits. Yet we need to minister to the family as a whole and empower the family to minister to themselves. The Church should not hold all the responsibility on raising godly teenagers but actually help the parents to be the primary ones to do so. Families today look different than they did 50 years ago. Not every family consists of a mother and father and two children. Families may have one parent, two dads or moms, no parents but grandparents, bunches of children, wide range of ages, be just one single person, multi-ethnic, or even multiple religions. If we want to continue to value families and serve them, we need to find ways to adapt to the changes in families and empower them to grow spiritually.

I struggled to come up with a metaphor for ministry. What I settled on I am not sure is a true metaphor but it is the best descriptor I could think of for right now and how I view ministry. Youth ministry is a ministry of transitions. There is a constant flow of teenagers entering the ministry while other teenagers are graduating the ministry. Adolescents change and grow a lot within the six or seven years they are a part of the ministry and so do their families. When they enter we are focused on feeding them everything spiritually but by the time they leave we expect them to be able to feed themselves spiritually and find their own place within the body of Christ. This is not an overnight transition but a process that takes much time and intentionality. Transitions continue to occur through adulthood but within the years of adolescence there are many transitions; biologically become adults, cognitively growing to think for themselves, starting to date and possibly even getting married, getting a driver's license, getting a first job, leaving home, etc. And each teenager in youth ministry is at a different place with each one of

those transitions. These transitions are like spinning plates; they all have their own speeds and rhythms but the youth ministry tries to keep each one going and be there for the ones that falter at different times for different reasons. And this is a ministry that cannot be done by one person but requires the time and attention of many parents and adults.