Ministry in a Modern Context

Ministers are facing a great challenge today in our modern culture. Temptations to compromise convictions and take up with societal trends for the sake of securing their jobs or their congregational growth are constant threats. “The church is being set upon from every conceivable angle today by a society that is sliding from immorality to near hedonism.”\(^1\) Notwithstanding these obstacles and difficulties, the church at large continues to grow, the gospel continues to be preached, and seminaries continue to train students for ministry. Since Jesus is the one building the church, and since we have the assurance that not even the gates of Hades will overpower her, ministers can take courage in the face of the challenges and press on to carry out their service with enthusiasm and dignity.\(^2\)

But first, what is the proper role of a minister? And what constitutes fulfilling that role? These questions have been addressed in two books that are of interest to us in this paper: Eugene Peterson’s *Working the Angles*, and Henri Nouwen’s *Creative Ministry*. I will be looking at each author’s view of ministry and the proper function of a pastor or minister in the church. In conclusion, I will offer my own personal perspective of these two aspects of the role and function of a minister in the body of Christ.

**Nouwen’s View**

Beginning with Nouwen, the layout of his book is divided into five chapters. Each title marks a distinguishing act of ministry: Teaching, Preaching, Pastoral care, Organizing, and Celebrating. The introduction sets the tone for the entire book. In his introduction as well as in his conclusion, Nouwen highlights the fact that there is a desire among ministers today to regain


\(^2\) Matt 16:18 (New American Standard Bible--NASB)
true spirituality. There seems to be a sense that something vital has gone missing. In Nouwen's words, "Perhaps we have to say that one of the main reasons for the many frustrations, pains, and disappointments in the life of numerous Christian ministers is rooted in the still-growing separation between professionalism and spirituality."\(^3\) Today, being a minister is viewed much like any other profession, but spirituality is a necessary element of ministry that is unique to its field. Throughout the book, these acts of service in ministry are juxtaposed to what they are not. Teaching is not just transference of knowledge, preaching is more than retelling a story, true pastoral care goes beyond mere skillful responses, organizing the church is not manipulation of structures, and finally, celebrating exceeds the protective ritual.\(^4\) Though ministers undergo training, examination, placement, and receive a wage, much like any other profession, Christian ministry is unique in that there is a cry for true spirituality, which longs for nurture and refuses neglect, and which lies beyond the bounds of mere professionalism.\(^5\)

Could it be that our modern society, more specifically the modern church, has come to view full-time ministry as just another profession and has lost the awareness of the need to nurture spiritual life? Just like doctors and lawyers, ministers go to school, study the books, take exams, complete internships, and apply for jobs that will pay enough to meet their living expenses. It is not altogether bad that this occupational path is open to so many in our culture. Even if one does not enter full-time ministry, theological education has many benefits. The tools and resources offered by institutions of higher learning are replete with value and can be quite useful to a minister during and after seminary, as well as to any serious disciple. Nonetheless, “this separation [of spirituality from professional ministry] is quite understandable if we look at the development of theological education during the last decade.”\(^6\) Nouwen goes on to explain how the traditional spiritual disciplines have been abandoned in the training process of

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\(^4\) Ibid., Table of Contents.
\(^5\) Ibid., xxi.
\(^6\) Ibid., xvii.
ministers, and have been replaced with the seemingly more pressing concerns of parishioners
and projects for community development. However, rather than being more productive, in the
long run this approach has led to an increase in pastors feeling disappointed and burned-out.

In our youthful vigor, we prize freedom of movement, freedom of choice, freedom to
explore, to become, and to experience. We seek to develop our own personal identity, beliefs,
and personality. On the dedication page of Nouwen’s book, he quotes Jesus’ words to Peter,
“When you were young you put on your belt and walked where you liked; but when you grow
old...somebody else will...take you where you would rather not go.”

As a minister progresses through the stages of training and emerges into a lifestyle of ministry, he may find that maturity
and the nurture of spirituality necessitates a relinquishment of their personal freedom of choice.
Christian ministry is ultimately a pursuit of Christ-likeness. He who set forth an example for us to follow is the one who laid down his life for us, the most perfect act of love ever known. Thus, a
minister who is endeavoring to follow in these footsteps will find that, true ministry is the laying
down of yourself out of love for the other.
The bottom line is love: to follow in Jesus’ footsteps in laying down our lives for our friends.
Nouwen is calling pastors back to the genuine fulfillment of their position in the church and their calling from God.

**Peterson’s View**

Peterson’s *Working the Angles* gives a contrastive perspective. Unlike Nouwen,
Peterson does not offer a view that emphasizes a discontent in pastors who feel they have lost spirituality in the expression of their ministry. Rather, he is saying that pastors, whether intentionally or not, have lost sight of their true purpose and have allowed themselves to

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7 Nouwen, as found on dedication page, a quote from John 21:18.
8 Nouwen, 118.
9 John 15:13
become friends with a worldly system, making them more like shopkeepers than ministers.\textsuperscript{10} However, in agreement with Nouwen, Peterson also indicates that pastors have lost a measure of spirituality, although they may not even notice. “Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mills.”\textsuperscript{11} In keeping with the image of shopkeepers, Peterson draws various parallels between the methodology inherent in running a good business and how many pastors seem to be managing their congregations these days. Keeping a shop involves keeping the customers happy, coming back for more goods. Advertisements paint a positive picture of your own merchandise, claiming that it is desirable, necessary, and even superior to the next guy’s. The customer is always right, profit is usually one of the main goals, and flowing with the trends can be considered essential to success. Unfortunately, too many churches have adopted this policy as a valid way to do ministry.\textsuperscript{12}

While Nouwen is more about the healing and rediscovery of spirituality in the minister him-or herself, Peterson seems more concerned with the minister fulfilling the responsibility of ministry: “keep the community attentive to God.”\textsuperscript{13} This is accomplished through maintaining the angles of prayer, reading Scripture, and giving spiritual direction.\textsuperscript{14} While Peterson tends to focus on the minister’s role as a spiritual leader in the congregation, Nouwen’s view of ministry is somewhat different. As stated by Philip Yancey in an article written for Christianity Today, published the month after Nouwen’s death, “the goal of education and formation for the ministry is continually to recognize the Lord's voice, his face, and his touch in every person we meet.”\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, Nouwen’s view of ministry is not altogether variant from Peterson’s. He also draws a connection between the spiritual life of the minister and the visible acts of service.

\textsuperscript{10} Eugene Peterson, \textit{Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 2.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 3.
Nouwen states that some disillusioned ministers may ask, “If my spiritual life cannot grow and deepen in the midst of my ministry, how will it ever grow on the edges?”\(^{16}\) Though the two authors come at it from different angles, they both show concern for the health of the spiritual life of the minister, and they both profess that the quality of this inner life will have repercussions on the quality of his or her ensuing ministry.

**Bringing it Home**

So, the question is: What is ministry? And how do ministers faithfully fulfill their role? To answer these questions, I believe we must go back to the beginning. When Jesus called Peter, we see that God is the initiator. Peter was deep in his own business, hauling nets and catching fish. Likewise, an essential starting point to any ministry is that an individual must hear for him- or herself the voice of God calling, “follow me.” In response to the call, one may say, “Here am I. Send me!”\(^{17}\) And Jesus says, “Go.”\(^{18}\) Understanding that God initiates the call and that one is sent--they are not choosing their own occupation according to their own preferences and fancies--is the first truth that will shape the expression of one’s ministry. It is always, “Yes, Lord,” rather than, “But, I…” Keeping near to the heart of God for the world, his redemptive purpose that he is working out in the earth today, is where the minister will receive her marching orders.

Looking back at the infancy stage of the Christian church, we can see that the relationship between one’s livelihood and one’s response to the call of Christ to “follow me” was starkly different than it is in our society today. When Christ called Peter and his brother Andrew, the scriptures say that, “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.”\(^{19}\) This scenario paints a picture of an authentic response to the call of Christ to become “fishers of men.” (vs. 19) This response involves forsaking the familiar and the predictable to launch out into an unknown

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\(^{16}\) Nouwen, xix.
\(^{17}\) Isaiah 6:8
\(^{18}\) Matt 28:19
\(^{19}\) Matt 4:20
frontier, fueled by faith and committed to God’s purpose in the world. Peter was called to follow Christ, even though, in the end, he would suffer for his faith and endure death for the sake of the gospel. True ministry involves risk at some level or another.

When one responds to the call to “Go,” she will quickly discover that the task is too big for her. Thus, the second truth that is essential in the life of a minister is the dependence upon grace, “[for] we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” Since God first initiated the call, the acts of service in ministry must also remain rooted in the purpose for which the call was given, trusting that all things necessary will be supplied. The purpose of this supply of grace is that we would continue responding and going, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.”

In conclusion, a minister finds his or her role in ministry by responding to the God who initiates the call, supplies the necessary abilities through grace, and faithfully continues to move the church towards Christ through transformation. The function of a minister within that role depends fully upon that same grace as it is supplied for the purpose of bringing the entire body of believers into full maturity in the faith, and to a complete knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. Nouwen said, “Ministry means the ongoing attempt to put one’s own search for God...at the disposal of those who want to join this search but do not know how.” May we all press on in our search, and as we discover greater measures of grace and deeper spiritual life in God, let us continue faithfully in the ministry we are called to, serving on another in love--for the complete maturity of every believer.

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20 Rom 12:6
21 Eph 4:13
22 Nouwen, 114.
Bibliography


