

continuous conversion

August 2010

Volume 5, #8

Your ministry is you

I spent a number of years in American Evangelical Protestant circles, and one common question always puzzled me:

“What is your ministry?”

Answers to this question usually involved some kind of factual statement, such as “I am an evangelist” or “I teach God’s word,” or (rarely) “I feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick.”

In every case, the person’s ministry was perceived and defined as an entity separate from the person’s self, almost like a job. Your ministry is like any other life choice, and may change “as the Lord leads” (as you perceive the Lord leading you).

Thus ministry is made into a commodity, like everything else in a consumer society—something that can be gained or lost, traded up or down, and which can be taken off or put on like a garment.

This concept is very far from what Jesus spoke about when He called for a through-and-through life change for His followers—a conversion, a rebirth and a complete new relationship with Himself and with our neighbors (the other 6 billion people who live on Earth at the moment).

He spoke right to his followers: “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant [minister] of all.” (Mark 9:35).

What does it mean to minister?

The word “minister” comes directly from Latin and means “servant.”

To minister to someone is to meet their needs, as a nurse or other caretaker might do. In European governments, people who lead specific parts of the government are called “ministers” to emphasize that they are serving their country. Even secular national governments recognize that ministers are servants, not masters.



If Christians are called to ministry, then, it seems logical to conclude that they are, above all, servants.

Where they serve, whom they serve, and all the rest are details. The particular situations in which they find themselves (presumably by following God’s leading) no more define them than their body defines their soul.

God’s followers are always servants, always ministers, leaving every Christian with the same ministry—the offering of himself or herself to serve God without question or hesitation.

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Continuous conversion is the process of living as a Christian; sanctification is another term for this process.



Your ministry is you

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What's wrong with defining your ministry?

In theory, nothing's wrong with defining your ministry. If you have to print up business cards, or register your Christian-related activities with the proper authorities, or get a diploma in a particular "ministry" specialty from a university, then you need to say exactly what your ministry is.

The problem is not in the definition but in the living out: it's much too easy to feel that your ministry gives you an excuse to avoid certain unpleasant opportunities to serve and to place yourself within a hierarchy of service.

An excuse to avoid certain unpleasant "opportunities to serve"

This is the bureaucratic approach to Christian life. Even St. Paul fell into the trap of separating and ranking various types of service:

"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."

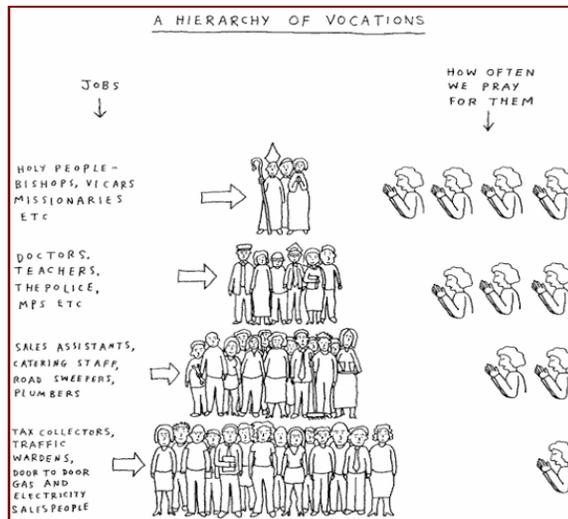
From this verse, taken out of the context in which he wrote it to the Corinthians, some Christians have reasoned that if your special talents or gifts from God are in one area, you needn't concern yourself with any random service opportunities that don't fit your "job description."

Thus missionaries, and missionaries only, spread the Gospel (they are "equipped"); a teacher can only teach, not wash dishes; a preacher can only preach, not clean toilets.

This is obviously silly. Why would anyone imagine that God will respect our little flow charts and reporting diagrams, only presenting us with those calls for service that fit our niche of Christian service? Does God tailor the world for us? Or does He expect us to submit our lives to Him?

An excuse to place yourself within a hierarchy of service

Even better than being able to piously avoid unpleasant or annoying opportunities to serve others, being comfortably nestled within a hierarchical structure gives you so many ways to make yourself feel important.



<http://www.aftersunday.org.uk/living/vocation>

Using the same techniques that businesses use to encourage workers to "excel" (work extra hard for no extra money) by dangling the carrot of promotion and privilege in front of them, Christians who serve in hierarchies can aspire to greater, more prominent roles: associate pastors can become assistant pastors, who can become executive pastors!

Naturally, the higher the position, the higher the compensation: salary, respect, donations, farewell and retirement parties, etc. Each event delineates the exact level of authority and honor ceded to each position within the hierarchy, leading to stability and a clear understanding of who's who and what's what.

Is this how Jesus described the world His Father made? Did He say that we should observe how the world is organized and do likewise? Hardly.

His own ministry cannot be separated from His presence on Earth. Where he walked, the blind could see, the lame could walk. Lepers were cleansed and the sick were healed. He brought the Light of God into the world; He took that light wherever He went.

He was His ministry, and we who try to imitate Him need to see ourselves the same way: servants of the Living God, ready to do whatever we find to do, regardless of what we may want to label our "ministry."