



Clerical Character: Reflecting on Ministerial Morality

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We live in a time in which we are forced to reconsider matters most of us would like to think have long been settled. Thus we are now asked to develop an ethic explicitly for the clergy. Such a request surely seems odd, since being a minister and being moral has been thought to go together like horse and carriage. Of course the morality required of ministers has been assumed to be that required of anyone; it is just “more so” for the ministry. For example, we all know that adultery is wrong but if a minister is caught in adultery somehow it seems more serious. Or we think that we generally should be kind, but given the competitive world in which we must make a living, we know we cannot always be such. But ministers should always be kind because they have been given permission to opt out of our economic system. Of course as a result it is alleged they often fail to understand the “real” world.

This traditional view of the morality expected of the clergy is open to serious objection. To expect ministers to be moral, only more so, seems to imply that the validity of the ministry depends on the holiness of the person performing the office. Donatism dies hard, as like most heresies its mutations seem endless. Indeed the expectations of Protestant congregations about the kind of life they expect of their ministers is now the natural home of Donatism. The less Protestants appreciate the sacerdotal functions of the ministry, the more, it seems, they expect their clergy to conform to an uncompromising moral ideal. Having little sense that ordination involves any intrinsic character and set of responsibilities, it almost seems as if it is necessary to find some special role that justifies identifying some as ministers. That role too often turns out to be that clergy are expected to live up to an ideal morality which the laity commends but does not intend to, or at least, finds they cannot live. The minister, and also the minister’s family, should live up to the ideal, since after all someone has to set an example.

This understanding of the morality required of the clergy often becomes a terrible double-bind for those in the ministry. For clergy are expected to be dif-

ferent—altruistic, infinitely understanding, self-effacing—yet their success often depends on their having a winning personality that suggests that, in spite of their being a minister, they are really, underneath, just like us. In its crude form, for example, this double-bind entails that ministers should not use “rough” language, but it is a point in their favor, at least for some members of their congregation, if the minister at times is led to say “damn.” After all, such behavior shows that even the minister is human and thus legitimates our own behavior.

It may be that the concern to develop a ministerial morality is due to the displeasure of some with the increasing refusal of many clergy to conform to this set of expectations. Many in

the ministry find that the hypocrisy—and worse, the self-deception—that such a morality engenders is too hard to live for a lifetime. Better for the clergy and the laity to say what we have known all along—namely, there is no difference between the clergy and anyone else. Some ministers' marriages will fail, some ministers will be ambitious, some will be less than forgiving, some will even be less than honest, especially when their self-interest is involved, but that does not mean they are disqualified from the ministry. Just as one can still be a good lawyer or doctor, while being less than morally admirable in other aspects of their life, so one can be a minister. What matters is not the kind of persons they are, but whether they can responsibly deliver their professional service.

I. CHARACTER AND OFFICE

That we seem caught in such unattractive alternatives is an indication that a discussion of ministerial morality is long overdue. I think, however, that we will make little headway in understanding the nature of the kind of morality necessary to the ministry if we let the agenda be set by the kind of issues I have discussed above. By responding to the call to develop an ethic for the clergy we can too easily accept a far too limited sense of “ethics.” The temptation is to think the task to be the development of a code, similar to that of the medical and legal professions, to guide the training and/or behavior of ministers. I have no wish to deny the usefulness of such codes or to deny that such a code might be of some use for the ministry. However, I think that such a “legalistic” response would be insufficient for helping us develop a sense of the kind of morality appropriate to the ministry. For the ministry, as well as the law and medicine, involves more than questions of what is permissible and impermissible but raises the question of the kind of persons that we should be to be ministers. It is not enough, in other words, that those called to the ministry refrain from or do certain things, but it is necessary that they be the kind of persons, that they have the character, to sustain them in the ministry.

Such a suggestion I suspect will appear so obvious to many that it is hardly worth mentioning. Yet as is so often the case when we fail to properly appreciate the obvious, we distort our own best insights. For example, I suspect many laity care more about the kind of person their minister is than whether the minister perfectly corresponds to some moral ideal. The problem is not that the laity fail to care about the kind of person the minister is, but too often the kind of person they want their minister to be is not shaped by any appreciation for the office to

which the minister is called. For one of the most profound moral challenges which the clergy face in our day is the disparity between the theological definition and the sociological reality of the ministry.

These are extremely complex issues that involve questions of the nature of the ministry, the sacraments, and morality. But in short I am suggesting that the character of those serving in the ministry should be determined by the character of the office to which they have been ordained. In other words there is a connection between the sacramental character of the ministry and the moral character of those who serve in the ministry. Part of our current difficulty is the failure by laity and minister alike to appreciate that those who have been called to the ministry are, or at least should be, made different by that calling.¹ Put simply, ordination bestows on ministers the power not all in the church possess—e.g., they alone can preside at the Eucharist.²

To possess such power requires them to have the character sufficient to that task as well as to protect them and the church from abuse of that power.

I am aware that such language may sound far too “Catholic” for Protestant ears, but I think it is not only theologically justified but also more nearly does justice to the empirical realities of the ministry. For if the particular character of the ministry is not acknowledged, the character of the office as well as those occupying it becomes far too subject to the cultural sentimentalities that currently sustain the assumption that “religion is a good thing.” Moreover, it is important that the question of ministerial office and character be put in terms of power, for it is not any specifiable knowledge or skill that makes the ministry, though certainly knowledge and skill will hopefully be present, but rather the power the minister has been given to perform the rites of the church for the church. For as most ordination rites make clear, “all the baptized share the gifts of the Spirit, the command to evangelize, witness, heal and serve.”³ The ministry, therefore, requires no skills or gifts that are not generally available to

¹Many in the ministry have difficulty accepting the fact that by becoming a minister they have in effect been set apart. Sometimes the refusal to so understand their role is an attempt to avoid the kind of moral expectations described above—that is that one should represent a moral ideal that makes one innocent if not childlike. There are certainly good reasons for anyone to want to avoid that set of moral assumptions, but to deny the special character of the ministerial calling is ultimately a formula for irresponsibility and self-deception. Ministers are invited to enter into the lives of others with a kind of intimacy that few others are permitted. They are asked to exercise certain responsibilities for a community that cannot help but make them different. It is a false humility that would encourage them to refuse to accept the fact that they will be and are made morally different by being a minister.

²It is interesting how seldom the power exercised by ministers is properly appreciated. The failure to do so, moreover, creates an unhealthy situation, for when power is not acknowledged then it cannot help but be manipulative. One of the deepest self-deceptions among Christians is the assumption that the church is maintained free from any appeal to power. What must be recognized is that power is rightly part and parcel of any community and particularly the church. The question is not power or no power, but the kind of power and how it is distributed. For a very useful discussion of power in the church, see Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 51-80.

³William Willimon, “The Spiritual Formation of the Pastor: Call and Community,” *Quarterly Review* 3/2 (Summer, 1983) 33.

anyone in the church. Rather ordination is but the way “some Christians are designated for the task of equipping the saints, caring for the church, building up the community, representing the church as a whole. In ordination the church puts some of its folk under orders; it makes them official community people.”⁴ In short, it gives them power.

The ministry is thus set apart and identified with specific persons not because it involves matters reserved to the minister or priest, but because those activities which characterize the ministry are properly activities of the whole church. The clergy do what they do because what they do are activities that all Christians share in common. That is to say that the things that make the ministry what it is are those that make the church the church. The ministry is determined by the mission that is the church to witness to God’s presence in the world through the proclamation of the word, the administration of baptism and Eucharist, and the upbuilding of the body.⁵ These activities determine the character of the ministry so that, even if someone lacks a full range of the “social skills,” such a person may nonetheless occupy the office of the ministry.

II. THE ETHIC OF “PROFESSIONALISM”

Such an account of the ministry will no doubt strike many as out of touch with reality. In short, it may be good theology, but it is terrible sociology. For to be a minister today requires one to be part social worker, part counselor, good with young people, an engaging speaker, fair administrator, moral exemplar without being judgmental, and a host of other functions. The problem, in other words, is that the loss of any center to the office of the ministry has meant that the ministry has become a hodge-podge of tasks that threaten to destroy anyone who tries to fulfill these often incompatible demands. The question of the moral character of the clergy is therefore inseparable from a recovery of the character of the ministry itself.⁶ We cannot know what kind of people we should want to have in the ministry until we know better what we want the ministry to be.

⁴Ibid., 33.

⁵I cannot attempt here any adequate defense of these claims, but for a fuller account along the lines suggested, see Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) 49-60.

The claim that one of the “marks” of the church is the “upbuilding of the body” is particularly important for the subject of ministerial ethics. It is, however, one of the most overlooked and underdeveloped areas of ecclesiology. For if the church as a whole has no sense of what it means for members to aid one another in learning to live more nearly exemplary lives, then an emphasis on the character of the minister cannot help but reinforce the idea of a two stage ethic—one for the ministry and one for the laity. It is interesting to note that many Protestants who critique Catholics for maintaining a two stage ethic continue to assume that the minister should be held to a higher standard of behavior than the laity. Of course the problem is in the metaphors “higher and lower,” as they give the impression of superiority that distorts the nature of the different gifts and responsibilities that are necessary to sustain the church.

⁶There is still no better description of this problem than that of H. Richard Niebuhr in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956). Moreover Niebuhr rightly saw the problem as perennial. Thus he says “Temptations to abandon the proper work of the ministry because of ambition or the desire to please are encountered—and succumbed to—at all times. Temptations to continue a traditional course by virtue of sheer inertia are also familiarly human. But what critics who point to these reasons for the loss of certainty seem too often to forget is that the Church is never only a function of a culture nor ever only a supercultural community; that the problem of its ministers is always how to remain faithful servants of the Church in the midst of cultural change and yet to change culturally so as to be true to the Church’s purpose in new situations. Those who suggest that the ministry should provide for its continuation by turning itself into a kind of social or counseling service ignore the nature of the ministry and really provide for its discontinuation. So do those who seek a remedy for present ills by insisting on unchanging adherence to a form of the ministry developed in some earlier cultural period” (56-57). By calling for a recovery of the character of the ministry I do not mean to suggest that ministers should no longer be involved in counseling, even though counseling may not be integral to the ministerial task, but rather the question is how they learn to counsel as ministers of the church of Jesus Christ. The difficulty occurs when counseling determines the character of ministry rather than vice versa.

But that is exactly, it seems, what we are unsure about. In 1934 Mark May observed,

What is the function of the minister in the modern community? The answer is that it is undefined. There is no agreement among denominational authorities, local officials, seminaries, professors, prominent laymen, ministers or educators as to what it is or should be. The work of the lawyer, the physician, the teacher, the artist, the writer and the engineer, is clear-cut and rather sharply defined (at least

in the mind of the average man), so that when a young man chooses one of these professions he has some idea of what he is getting into. But not so with the ministry. Entering the ministry is more like entering the army, where one never knows where he will land or live or what specific work he will be called upon to perform.⁷

There seems little reason to think our situation has changed since May's book.

Given the ambiguity of the ministerial role, it is surprising that one of the dominant trends in recent times has been to model the ministry, and correlatively ministerial ethics, after the professions of law and medicine. Thus a recent letter inviting me to write on this issue for another theological journal suggested the general purpose of the issue was to "address conceptual and theoretical issues in professional ethics for practicing ministers." That sounds harmless enough, but the clear presumption is that ministerial ethics is but another form of a more general area called "professional ethics." It is certainly not my intention to deny all connections between issues in law, medicine, and the ministry—e.g., questions of confidentiality, relations between peers, and other such issues—but yet I think it would be a mistake to model how we think of the kind of moral formation required for the ministry on the basis of other professions; or put more accurately, I think it would be a mistake, given the contemporary assumptions about what kind of ethic should characterize those professions and how new members should be formed by that ethic.

I suspect that at least part of the temptation to model the ministry after law and medicine derives from the sense on the part of many that the ministry lacks the prestige or competence of law and medicine. E. Brooks Holifield notes that with the rise of urban parishes clergy have suddenly found themselves compared with lawyers and physicians in a manner that at once enhanced and threatened their self-perception. He quotes George Howe, professor of biblical

⁷Quoted by H. R. Niebuhr in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 51.

literature at Columbia Seminary as warning, "All the professions are advancing. We must at least advance with them, and if possible keep before them, or be despised."⁸

Howe's advice has been heeded by most Protestant denominations for, as Dennis Campbell has observed, over the past thirty years there has been a trend to make the ministry more professional.⁹ He notes that this development has been due less to a concern with tradition than an assumption that professionalization will improve the quality of practice of the ministry. Yet, as Campbell suggests, though the adoption of the secular model of the profession has been done with the best of intentions, it has lacked rigorous theological rationale. Theological schools have adopted the professional model in hopes of raising the standards of the ministry so that now the tendency is to make "learning take precedence over call" to judge adequacy for the ministry.¹⁰

I suspect that another indication of the dominance of the professional model is the prominence of Clinical Pastoral Education in ministerial education. "Clinical" seems to promise the objective standards necessary to supply pastors with the skills necessary to claim to be members of a profession—namely, to be persons who can distinguish between their professional role and their own feelings and convictions. Thus ministers are taught that they must not confuse their functions as counselor and their ministerial role, even though they may perform the former

in the name of the latter, since the latter may entail moral judgments that might not be therapeutic.¹¹ Exactly to the extent that ministers are able to distance themselves, they “act like professionals” and thus receive esteem from the other professionals they are so desperate to emulate. Such professionalization seems better than being lost amid the chaos of the ministerial role.

In fact the professionalization of the ministry does contain an ethic that trains people in a very determinative way. So it is not as if we need to consider

⁸E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians* (Durham: Duke University, 1978) 34.

⁹Dennis Campbell, “The Ordained Ministry as a Profession: Theological Reflections on Identity,” *Quarterly Review* 3/2 (Summer, 1983) 24. For Campbell’s more extensive reflections, see his *Doctors, Lawyers, Ministers: Christian Ethics in Professional Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982). In his *A History of Pastoral Care in America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), E. Brooks Holifield notes that reform movements in medicine and law in the nineteenth century made ministers suspicious that they were not “professionals.” As a result ministers took up the complaint that popular regard for the clergy had declined especially among the educated (p. 173).

¹⁰D. Campbell, “The Ordained Ministry as a Profession,” 25. Of course it is not just a matter of making learning take precedence over call, but the kind of learning that is involved. That is why the kind of issues Edward Parley raises in his *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) are so important. If seminary education should be, as he argues, a *therapeia*, then the close connection between call and learning may appear quite different. The current interest in “spirituality” in so many Protestant seminaries, I feel, reflects more the disease from which we suffer than the cure. For spirituality so understood still stands in too much discontinuity with what is done in the classroom. Courses in spirituality will be of little help if we continue to assume study of the New Testament or theology to be simply a means to inform students to make them more capable of service in the ministry. All education is an exercise in moral formation even if the course is said to be “strictly academic.”

¹¹For a fuller analysis of this, see my “The Pastor as Prophet: Ethical Reflections on an Improbable Mission,” in *The Prophetic Task of Pastoral Ministry*, edited by Earl Shelp (forthcoming).

what ethic we should teach for the ministry, but what ethic is already being taught through our attempt to professionalize the ministry. Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out that the ethic which dominates most professional life is seldom noticed or acknowledged because it does not appear to be an ethic. Yet he suggests that the “expert”—namely, the person who promises to have the skills and knowledge to accomplish the consumer’s desires—sets the standard and morality of professional practice.¹² To the expert, the world is constantly open to manipulation as living itself becomes an exercise in “problem solving.” It should not be surprising that the ministry is influenced by this development so that we assume that the ministry requires those who have acquired the skills to be effective “communicators” or know how to “people manage.”

This sense of expertise goes hand in hand with the current concern in law and medicine to develop more accurate codes of ethics. For the more the profession thinks of itself as defined by its members’ “expertise,” the more it becomes important to protect the profession from being held accountable to those that are not “experts.” Though codes can well indicate the basic requirements for the practice of a profession, as well as serve a useful educative function, they can also be used to safeguard the profession from the very people it is supposed to serve. When this happens the very nature of a profession and its moral practice is rendered unintelligible. For even though the skills and knowledge that characterize a professional may be highly specialized and acquired through rigorous training and much experience, the professionals are justified only because they serve a good affirmed as essential to a community’s common good. Thus law and

medicine became “professions” because they professed dedication to certain goods of a community sufficient to justify their being set apart for no other task than to engage in that activity.

It is often overlooked that those who go into the professions, including teaching, are allowed to live lives that would otherwise be described as irresponsible. The member of a profession is allowed, for example, to spend most of his or her time in study—an activity that does little to add to the material wealth of a civilization. The justification for such a privilege can only be that the community thinks that setting aside some for such study serves the goods that make that community what it is. Thus lawyers are allowed to spend most of their life “practicing law” because the law embodies the community’s commitment to order its relations in a just and peaceful manner. The physician is allowed to spend years in study and to spend infinite time caring even for the dying (ideally) because of our commitment not to abandon the ill. In like manner the church sets aside some of its own to do nothing but study Scripture, lead worship, and make the church present to the ill because the church is a community that believes such tasks are at the heart of what makes the church the church.

The development of codes to regulate the behavior of lawyers and physicians, moreover, depends on the assumption that the skills of these professions

¹²Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) 72. MacIntyre suggests that with the ethos of expertise comes a corresponding set of presuppositions—namely the aspiration to value neutrality inasmuch as possible in all disciplines and the claim of manipulative power in the service of efficiency.

page 188

are of service to a designated client whose interests are overriding. Thus physicians are required to care for their patients whether they like them or not. Moreover, they are required to care for a patient in a manner such that their care cannot be qualified in the interest of another patient or even the good of humanity. The lawyer is required to seek the best interest of a client no matter what the lawyer may think of the client’s general mode of life. The commitment to the individual client thus gives a moral purposiveness to medicine and the law that can make the attempt to articulate a “code of ethics” a positive development. The code is meant to express the profound moral commitment to serve the person in need even when the utilitarian ethos of our society wishes to qualify such service.

The ministry, however, is not fundamentally determined by an overriding commitment to an individual client. So the very idea of a “code of ethics” for the ministry is not intelligible, for the ministry lacks the necessary moral presumption for such a code. Of course there is a sense that the ministry does have a “client” whose good overrides all other considerations. Without loyalty to that client, moreover, there is no way to maintain the integrity of the ministry as it threatens to be dissipated in the whirlwind of service to the unlimited needs of a people who are unsure of what makes them a community in the first place. The ministry, in short, is about service to God by serving a people who require no other service than to have their lives constantly directed to the living God. The minister is not a generalist skilled in the latest counseling technique, but rather the one singled out to direct all the needs of the community in the service of God. Morally, what sustains those in such service is not to be found in a code, but in character.

That such is the case, moreover, can be illustrated in relation to medicine and law. For

those professions “ethics” can no more be captured through a code than can that of the ministry. Those who wrote the first codes of ethics for law and medicine assumed such codes made sense only if one assumed that those who adhered to the codes were people of character or, as it was put in the nineteenth century, gentlemen.¹³ For it was the mark of a gentleman, a person of

¹³For this point, particularly in the legal context, I am indebted to Tom Shaffer’s many articles on the subject of legal education. See, for example, his “Moral Theology in Legal Ethics,” *Capital University Law Review* 12/2 (Winter, 1982) 179-183 and “Christian Lawyer Stories and American Legal Ethics,” *Mercer Law Review* 33 (1982) 877-901. Shaffer’s case is both historical and normative so he argues that the first development of codes of ethics for the lawyer presupposed the ethics of the gentleman, but it is also the case that no account of legal ethics can be sufficient that ignores the importance of character of the lawyer. Thus Shaffer is fond of quoting Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* in justification of his willingness to defend an unpopular client, “I can’t be one man in town and another man at home.”

The development of codes of ethics for physicians no less emphasized that physicians should be people of high moral character. Indeed most licensure procedures still require the person being given a licence to practice medicine be of “good moral character.” See for example Paul Camenisch, “On the Matter of Good Moral Character,” *Linacre Quarterly* 45/3 (August, 1978) 273-283.

page 189

character, that he was considered to be not different than he appeared.¹⁴ Persons of character are self-assured so that they are not easily distracted from their duty, even though their duty may well mean that they must act against their own interests or the interests of those they most care about. Yet they hold to their duty, to their character, because they are convinced that no one owes anything more important to family, friends, or society than to be a person of character. It is our most important public duty. To be anything else means that society has no way of guarding itself against the lie. Without such protection, moreover, we are abandoned to a world of manipulation and ultimately violence.

It is one of the ironies of our time that codes are increasingly “revised” in order to avoid character judgments about those who are in and would enter the professions. After all, it is said, what persons do with their private lives is their own business. It is not important that a person be good, but that a person be “competent,” “know his or her business,” and be technologically proficient—in short, be an expert. To the extent that such strategy is successful—and there is no question that it is within its own presuppositions successful—we lose the sense that law and medicine are or were fundamentally moral arts.

III. PROFESSIONALS OF CHARACTER

But why do the law, medicine, and the ministry require practitioners of character? First and foremost they deal with matters that matter to our ability to live morally. But such matters are not clear cut; they involve questions that can only be resolved through wise counsel and judgment. Put differently, the professions deal in contingent matters which require wisdom if we are to more nearly approximate the good.¹⁵ For well trained and experienced practitioners, many judgments may well begin to look “routine,” but skillful professionals know that they can never try to routinize their work, for to do so would result in a failure to serve each person’s particular needs.

But why does the particularity of judgments intrinsic to professional practice require that those who practice the profession be people of character? Quite simply, judgment requires

wisdom which is a peculiar combination of skillful mastery of one's craft, experience, insight, and most important of all, self-knowledge. Aristotle was fond of using the example of the experienced physician to elicit his sense of the wisdom he thought necessary to knowing how to live well. Aristotle suggested that physicians often know the right thing to do even though they do not know—at least “know” in the sense of being able to

¹⁴In his *The Gentlemen Theologians* Holifield notes that the ministry found itself in a particular tension, for ministers were at once required to be sensitive to society's judgments of propriety, and they were also warned never to appear to be what they were not. Thus he quotes Thornwell to the effect that “The most serious form of hypocrisy is that in which a man pretends to be a character to which he is really a stranger,” and notes that William McKendree, a much admired minister of the day, was commended as “one of the kind of men who do not care what others think of them” (37).

¹⁵For a more extended defense of this claim see my *Suffering Presence: Essays on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped and the Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, forthcoming).

page 190

give a general principle—why they do what they do. That is why the professions can never be learned abstractly but require apprenticeship to a master, for only by being initiated by a master do we gain some idea of the kind of people we need to be to be capable of judgments.

Of course those who are called to a profession must still be schooled. For part of what it means to become a professional is to learn the wisdom of the past—wisdom that defies complete articulation into principle or technique—so that the next generation does not have to repeat the many mistakes of the past. Those who submit to such an education must be willing to be disciplined and formed to be worthy to represent and practice their profession. Therefore training to be a professional must be amoral training that at least puts one on the road to having a character sufficient to sustain the promised service to others.

From this perspective there is more continuity between the ministry, law, and medicine than first appeared. For they are all activities in which learning to do them well requires the development of character sufficient to sustain the goods intrinsic to the practice of their craft.¹⁶ If we are to think about “ministerial ethics,” therefore, we must think about the kind of persons that are capable of sustaining the practice of the ministry for a lifetime. Questions of talent and intelligence are not unimportant, but only when talent and intelligence are shaped or embodied in character can we have the confidence that a person is ready to meet the demands of service to God through being an official of God's church.

To interject the idea of character into discussion of “professional ethics” will strike many as an unwelcome development. For how do we ever know whether a person has character, or how do we train someone to have character? In the legal profession questions of character almost appear to have been reduced to whether a person has ever committed a felony; in medicine, character is determined by the willingness to persevere in the face of the often close to inhumane treatment in medical school;¹⁷ and for the ministry whether one is a practicing homosexual. It seems that questions of character in our pluralistic culture simply cannot be adjudicated, and thus we had best turn back to a legalistic model for determining the ethics of the law, medicine, and even the ministry.

But if we do so, we must recognize that we have changed the fundamental character of the professions as moral practices. I think, however, that no profession can avoid questions of character no matter how hard it may try, and that is particularly true of the ministry. It is not

enough that the clergy do not lie, cheat, or be promiscuous, but ministers must have a character capable of sustaining

¹⁶A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 175, describes a practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.”

¹⁷Moral training occurs in medical schools, although it is seldom acknowledged as such. For example, see Charles Bosk’s extraordinary account of the training of surgeons in his *Forgive and Remember* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1981).

page 191

their peculiar responsibility of performing the official acts of the Christian community. Ministers are not “better” than other Christians, but they have made themselves open to call from others that may well make them different. Thus the pastor who visits a family that death has touched is rightly reminded that he or she is there not just as another friend, but as the pastor—that is, the one who represents the church and thus must be God’s presence no matter how inadequate he or she may feel to that task.¹⁸

Such a perspective does not mean that God has not and will not continue to use people of questionable “morality” to be officials of the church. A call for the importance of character is not an attempt to sneak the Donatist point of view in the back door. But what must be said is that while God’s grace can be found through the most unlikely servants, it is nonetheless the case that the ministry is sustained by those who have learned that the very ability to be faithful ministers of God’s church requires character. Yet it is also the case that some acquire character by living up to the expectations of God’s people and by doing so become more than they knew they were. I suspect that every minister has at one time or another found such to be the case. Indeed it may well be that the first characteristic necessary to being a minister is the recognition that we must depend on others to be able to sustain the task.

IV. WHAT KIND OF CHARACTER?

I have argued that no attempt to develop an ethic for the clergy can be adequate that does not attend to questions of character. Much more needs to be said about the kind of character necessary for the ministry and the space I have left allows me to make only a few suggestions in that respect. At the very least, however, an emphasis on character means that the church will have to be concerned with a wide range of issues for the calling and training of people for the ministry. It is not enough that persons not be “immoral,” but neither should they be vain, proud, intemperate, cowardly, ingratiating, and unloving. Moreover, it must be asked whether a person exhibits the patience and hope so necessary to the ministry. For without patience and hope there is little chance that a person will have the constancy to sustain him or her through the disappointments and betrayals so often involved in the ministry.¹⁹

I can think of no virtue more necessary to the ministry today than constancy.²⁰ Without steadfastness to self and to one’s task I do not see how the ministry can be sustained. Without constancy the minister is tempted to aban-

¹⁸Dennis Campbell nicely makes the point in his “The Ordained Ministry as a Profession,” 28. He goes on

to suggest that “Ordination results in the modification of individuality. The gift of God’s Holy Spirit in the act of ordination alters the self-as-self and results in the powerful reality of the self-as-representative figure.”

¹⁹For a treatment of the centrality of patience and hope as virtues necessary to locate the self within God’s story see my *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).

²⁰For an account of the nature and significance of constancy as a virtue, see Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, 222-226. See also my essay, “Constancy and Forgiveness: The Novel as a School for Virtue,” *Notre Dame English Journal* 15/3 (Summer, 1983) 23-54.

don the church to the ever present temptation of unbelief and unbelief’s most powerful ally, sentimentality.²¹ A minister must live and act believing that God is present in the church, through word and sacrament, creating a new people capable of witnessing to God’s kingdom. The minister must be filled with hope that God will act through word and sacrament to renew the church, but he or she must be patient, knowing that how God works is God’s business. From the crucible of patience and hope comes the fidelity to task that makes the ministry not a burden but a joy. So finally we must ask of those in ministry whether they are capable of joy, for if they are not, they lack a character sufficient to their calling. A person incapable of joy will lack the humor necessary for the self-knowledge that character requires.

Constancy, moreover, suggests the kind of character required by the nature of the ministerial office. For just as ordination is a sign of God’s faithfulness to the church, so it is required of those in ministry to be constant in all that they are and do.²² Ministers may well have “winning personalities,” but such a trait is no substitute for the church’s judgment that persons in the ministry will be faithful to their calling even if such faithfulness risks popularity. That such is the case is but a reminder that questions of ministerial morality are not only about the persons that enter the ministry, for the church itself must be comprised of people who require their ministry to do the unpopular thing. A ministry of character is only possible if we are a people of character.

It may be objected that it is not enough for ministers to be constant, for they must also be competent. That, of course, is true, but then neither are constancy and competency unrelated. For the crucial question is what makes a minister competent. The power bestowed by the church on the minister—that which gives the minister authority in the church—certainly requires the development of definite skills. But too often such skills are associated with knowing how to get along with people, rather than constant study of Scripture, liturgical leadership, and discernment of challenges currently facing his or her congregation. Given the undefined nature of the ministerial task today only a person of character will be able to sustain the discipline necessary for the development of such skills, for ministers are often rewarded more for being personally accommodating than for preaching in an exegetically responsible way.²³

²¹Indeed I think the greatest immorality of the contemporary ministry is its willingness to substitute socialization for belief in God. Too often an implicit atheism is accepted, or ministers do not believe their congregation can be held together by belief in God. Pastors fail to challenge the congregation to trust that God creates and sustains the church. As a result the church becomes the means by which the social status and values of a congregation are confirmed.

²²T. Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, 68, notes that Chrysostom, drawing on Scripture, noted four primary qualifications for the office of elder: (1) unimpeachable character, (2) sexual fidelity in marriage, (3) being a good parent, and (4) “under no imputation of loose living.” While it would be a mistake to overrationalize this list I think

it at least denotes a sense of constancy crucial to all that the minister does. That is why there is no easy distinction between office and person in relation to the ministry.

²³Or again, without denying the need for the ministry to develop good counseling skills, surely something has gone wrong when such skills are thought more important than knowledge of Scripture or theology.

I am aware that this perspective may well strike many as so ideal that it is unrealistic. Do I really expect twenty-five-year-olds to display such character? If they do not, it is hardly a fault, for they have not as yet lived long enough to gain the experience to be persons of character. That is why it is so important that those whom the church calls to be our officials be carefully examined and tested, for we must know them capable of becoming people of character, even if such character is only beginning as they enter the ministry. We ordain them believing that the ministry itself is a call to develop the character necessary to be of service to the church. Seminaries do not after all “make” ministers, but rather prepare some to be made ministers as God acts through the needs and expectations of a concrete people who have been formed to want and need the right things rightly.

Seminaries cannot, therefore, assume that they have the right to preempt the church’s prerogative to determine fitness for ministry. But that does not mean that seminaries are, therefore, given a license to be unconcerned about the shaping of the character of their students. It is not enough to train people in Scripture, church history, theology, and ethics; that training must serve to make their lives, and their professors’ lives, available to God’s shaping as officials of the church. As Aristotle maintained, and as we constantly rediscover, we become persons of character by being in the presence of persons of character—both the living and the dead. If, therefore, we are to begin to think about the ethics of the ministry we can do nothing better, and our seminaries have no more important function, than to direct those preparing and in the ministry to reflect on those lives that have honored their calling as ministers.²⁴

²⁴In this respect I think it particularly important that in training people for the ministry we attend more to the kind of people under whom they serve. We might well encourage, moreover, more attention to biographies and autobiographies of ministers in seminaries, for character is finally determined by example.

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