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The Ministry as Profession and Calling

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I

The question of whether ordained ministers constitute a profession is an old question, but one which needs fresh consideration in light of changing conditions.

One of these new conditions is the rapid growth of the Doctor of Ministry degree in North American theological schools in the past two decades. The D.Min. is most often done "in ministry," meaning that the minister is required to be in a parish or other ministry setting, and carries out doctoral studies in practice-based projects. And the D.Min. is often conducted interdenominationally. Both of these characteristics—practice-based studies and interdenominational settings—tend to foster emphasis on commonly shared *professional* aspects of ministry, rather than confessional and ecclesial doctrines of ministry which might be more abstract and potentially divisive. The current accrediting standards for professional degrees in the Association of Theological Schools[1] reflect this same professional emphasis. While not neglecting the role of the minister as a personal bearer and teacher of church tradition, these accrediting standards certainly emphasize the functional areas of ministerial practice—preaching, teaching, administration, pastoral care and counseling, and community participation. All of these functions appear to be shared by ministers of all major Protestant bodies, and by Catholic priests and Jewish rabbis as well.[2]

This heightened sense of professional identity represented in the D.Min. degree is also discussed in contemporary literature on the ministry. Though it is a somewhat arbitrary framing of this discussion, let me suggest that a professional understanding of ministry fully emerged in H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* in 1956,[3] and achieved its most detailed and extreme

[1]"Procedures, Standards, and Criteria for Membership," *Bulletin of The Association of Theological Schools* 34 (1980), Part 3.

[2]Ibid, 25-26.

[3]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

articulation in James Glasse's *Profession: Minister* in 1968.[4] Niebuhr argued that a new focal concept of the minister as *the pastoral director*[5] had emerged in churches of all kinds in modern America. This concept did not replace more ancient and traditional offices of ministry, he believed, but organized traditional themes in a new way. Niebuhr identified the following emphases as expressions of the minister as pastoral director: building or edifying the church, the call to ministry in its ecclesial and providential dimensions more than the secret or special

calling, the communal authority of the minister, and a more democratic political organization in the church.

Niebuhr's essay was not professionally or organizationally narrow. Indeed his closely reasoned argument is well grounded theologically. But critics were quick to challenge the managerial tone of the concept of the pastoral director, and to challenge its professionalizing possibilities.

In the same year that Niebuhr's book appeared, 1956, Samuel Blizzard published the findings of his research on what he called the six "practitioner roles" of the clergy-preacher, priest, pastor, teacher, organizer, and administrator.[6] Blizzard wanted to compare what ministers *actually do* with what they think they *should be* doing. Not surprisingly it was found that ministers spend much time on organizational and administrative work, where they often feel ill prepared, while spending less time than they would like in study, sermon preparation, and pastoral work. These findings seemed clearly to confirm Niebuhr's observation about the emerging role of the minister as pastoral director.

While not endorsing the state of affairs described in Blizzard's study, James Glasse in his 1968 book, *Profession: Minister,* argued much more positively for viewing the ministry as a profession. After surveying the defining characteristics of a profession, Glasse identifies the following five characteristics of the professional: educated in a body of knowledge, expert in the application of knowledge, institutional (serving society through a particular institution), responsible to act competently and ethically, and dedicated to the larger purpose and values represented by the profession. On all five counts, the ordained ministry fits this definition, according to Glasse. In the rest of the book, he spells out the implications of this argument for the six practitioner roles identified by Blizzard, showing how with preaching, for example, there are particular appropriate aspects of each of the five professional characteristics. Glasse argues eloquently and often persuasively for the benefits which will accrue if this professional understanding of the ministry is adopted. Unfortunately he restricts his discussion to full-time employed male ministers in "main-line" Protestant denominations, thus seriously qualifying professional or theological generalizations which might be drawn from his study.

One criticism of Glasse's thesis addresses that very weakness. Urban T. Holmes, writing from an Episcopal Church perspective in *The Future Shape of Ministry* in 1971,[7] claims that Glasse's kind of professionalism does not theologically fit the situation of the modern church and minister. Professionalism, says

[4]James D. Glasse, *Profession: Minister* (Nashville, Abingdon, 1968).
[5]H. R. Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry,* 79-80.
[6]Samuel W. Blizzard, "The Minister's Dilemma," *The Christian Century* (April 25, 1956) 508-10.
[7]Urban T. Holmes III, *The Future Shape of Ministry* (New York: Seabury, 1971) 195-200.

Holmes, confirms all the worst trends of modern society—equating ministry with role function, expecting impossible technical expertise from clergy in diverse areas of practice, and emphasizing skilled performance rather than the gifted or faithful character of the minister. All of this, Holmes fears, leads the minister and congregation away from the transcendent dimension of life, away from those very characteristics which uniquely qualify the church to minister in the contemporary world.

One can see in this criticism by Holmes the reflection of a Catholic ecclesial discomfort with any understanding of ministry which emphasizes function to the neglect of office or charisma. Another Catholic critique of professionalism is offered by Henri Nouwen in *Creative Ministry*,[8] which has as its title for the introductory chapter, "Beyond Professionalism." Nouwen is writing about the personal depth, the spirituality, of the pastor or priest which must be present if genuine ministry is to occur.

Other equally fundamental criticisms of the concept of the minister as a professional have been advanced. Ivan Illich writes from a third-world perspective. In *The Disabling Professions,* Illich argues that the dominant professions in developed societies determine what people need and then control the distribution of these apparently needed goods and services, thus rendering people incapable of articulating or meeting their own needs. But a post-professional ethos is emerging, Illich believes, in which people will form grass-roots political movements to renounce "professional peddlers of health, education, welfare, and peace of mind."[9]

A feminist critique of the harmful character of a professional understanding of the ministry appears in *The Future of Partnership*[10] by Letty Russell. She laments the confusion between vocation and occupation in the clergy and employs the liberation categories of *oppressors* and *oppressed* to analyze the typical relations between clergy and laity. She sees signs of hope in the emergence of new models of ministry—self-supporting ministries, clergy couples, special ministries of shorter duration, new models in theological education, and styles of corporate ministry in contrast to professional ministry. The entry of rapidly increasing numbers of women into the seminaries and the ministry may, according to Russell, hasten the deprofessionalization of ministry and the advent of new forms which express partnership rather than professionalism.

II

If it can be shown, as I have tried to do in the foregoing paragraphs, that the debate over whether the ministry is a profession has been conducted with distinctly modern accents, it can also be demonstrated that this same debate has occurred wherever the Christian community has designated established leadership positions defined by *functions which inhere in the office of the leader* (e.g., priests, pastors, teachers) in contrast to leaders who respond to the immediate demands of a situation or who receive the gifts of the Spirit (e.g., prophets, evangelists). The emer-

[8]Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Creative Ministry* (New York: Doubleday, 1971) xiv-xxi.
[9]Ivan Illich *et. al., Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977) 38.
[10]Letty M. Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 126-27.

gence of an established leadership rank marks a key transition from a movement to an institution. As soon as leadership roles are institutionalized, all the typical professional issues are confronted—recruitment, education, assessing qualifications, and professional discipline. The history of that debate in Christendom is beyond the scope of this essay (*The Ministry in Historical Perspective,* ed. H. R. Niebuhr and Daniel Day Williams [Harper and Brothers, 1956], contains papers exploring that history), but I want to discuss briefly two transitional periods in the professional ministry which can help focus our modern questions.

The first transitional period occurred at the time of the Protestant Reformation in

sixteenth century Europe. Since ordination was not understood sacramentally by either Luther or Calvin, it was necessary that other theological formulations be created to account for the continuation of ordained leadership in the Reformation of churches. The Lutheran doctrine of ordained ministry increasingly emphasized the proper conduct of the ministry of Word and sacrament, both as marks of the true church and of a proper ministry.[11] Calvinist doctrine also affirmed the ministry of Word and sacrament, but placed greater emphasis on the ordained minister as the authoritative teacher of the proper meaning of Word and sacrament.[12] In both instances the authority of the minister had shifted from a primarily sacramental authority to a more functionally understood authority—but not "functional" in our more modern and pragmatic sense. Rather the ministry was meant to function on behalf of the well-being of the whole community of Christian people. Indeed the Reformers in this respect could be said to have held an exceedingly "high" doctrine of the ordained ministry, in which God provided for the ordering of the church by establishing the offices of pastor and teacher.

One of the implications of this more clearly functional view of ordained ministry was the shift in the requirements for adequate pastoral leadership. No longer would learning the proper sacramental and moral formulas be as central as they were in preparing a sacramental priesthood. Rather in the Reformation churches the scholarly disciplines of biblical and theological studies became the marks of the profession. Priestly formation in the cathedral schools was replaced by scholarly studies at the universities. This characteristically Protestant affinity with the university and the other learned professions of law and medicine continues to appear in subsequent discussions of the professional character of the ministry.

The second transitional period is both more local and more recent. From about 1750 to 1850, a marked change in professional self-understanding can be documented in the Congregational clergy of New England and on the American frontier. Daniel Calhoun[13] traces profound changes around the issue of "permanence" in that transitional century. ("Permanence" represented the Congregational belief and practice which held that a minister's call to a particular parish was for life, or until failing health prevented a further performance of pastoral

[11]Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "A Lutheran View of the Validity of Lutheran Orders," *Eucharist and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 209-226.

[12]J. L. Ainslie, *The Doctrines of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1940) 42-56.

[13]Daniel H. Calhoun, *Professional Lives in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1965).

duties.) Calhoun shows how, by 1850, Congregational ministers could no longer count on such "permanency," and how a new professional self-consciousness had emerged to provide an identity as a relatively mobile professional class, the kind of identity which would have been unthinkable a century earlier. Donald M. Scott discusses the same period and the same clergy in his book, *From Office to Profession*,[14] where he argues that the ministry as public office had given way, by 1850, to the ministry as a spiritual profession, because of the ways in which revivalism and denominationalism, and the consequent emphasis in the church on private religion, had significantly altered the role of the minister in the community.

III

These two transitional periods help us understand that our modern questions about the ministry as profession have historic antecedents, and help us to broaden and deepen the questions posed in modern guise. And with the earlier discussion of the modern debate, these historical examples prepare the ground for the central thesis of this essay which now follows: *The ordained (or otherwise certified) ministries of the churches are and must be understood as professions, in the older and more traditional meanings of that term.* There are constituent dimensions of the ministry which go beyond professional categorization, which I will discuss later under the headings of *calling, character, and charisma.* And there are distorted understandings of professional (e.g., "professionalism") which have no place in the ministry of the churches. But without a properly professional self-understanding and practice, the ministry is just as threatened by incompetent practice as are other human service endeavors. I will try to explicate and defend this thesis by discussing the *proper meaning of professional,* in both its traditional and modern contexts. And I will outline those dimensions of ministry which go beyond professional characterizations— *calling, character, and charisma*.

A. *The proper meaning of professional.* The modern word "profession" is derived from the medieval term for those who entered ecclesiastical orders in which special functions were performed, such as lawyers, physicians, and civil servants. Thus a professional was a priest or member of a religious order with appropriate liberal arts and theological training, and with the additional learning—first acquired through apprenticeship and later with specialized university faculties—appropriate to one's special functions. Our English words for professional and professor reveal this common rootage.

As separate faculties of theology, medicine, and law emerged in European universities in the 17th and 18th centuries, the understanding of the professions became increasingly secularized. "Professional" no longer meant professing the faith through a specialized church order, but came to mean that kind of vocation *which combined a body of theoretical knowledge and research with the skills of application for public service.* In a *craft* there was indeed a high degree of practiced skill, but no necessary requirement to study and extend fundamental theory. In the *arts and sciences* there was a strong commitment to fundamental theory and research, but less attention to the immediate application of learning.

[14]Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1978).

While contemporary writers on the professions[15] acknowledge this historical evolution, much of the literature in the sociology of the professions emphasizes other characteristics, notably the *autonomy* of the professions (as represented by professional associations which set educational standards, admit qualified candidates, state and enforce ethical practices, and set fees charged to clients) and the recognized *public usefulness* of the professions (represented by customs and laws which formalize the privileges and responsibilities of the profession). While these characteristics (and indeed those listed earlier from Glasse) can be extended to the clergy, the fit seems awkward and strained. The clergy are clearly *not* autonomous in this modern professional sense. While they have great influence in determining educational and personal standards for entry into the profession, it is finally the *church* which makes these determinations. Ministers do not usually charge fees for their services. They are paid a salary, but this is not a fee for services rendered. And while the clergy are consistently judged to be very trustworthy in

public opinion polls, there is no clear public need for ordained clergy which could compare with the need for physicians or lawyers. Church bodies will make that claim, but not the body politic. Therefore the proper understanding of the ministry as a profession cannot be based on characteristics like autonomy or public recognition. Rather the emphasis must be on the more traditional characteristics of *integrating fundamental theory and research with skilled application and disciplined reflection on that application.*

It follows from this understanding of the profession that the pastor in the parish or other ministry setting needs a dual set of disciplines—those derived from the scholarly study of theology in all of its branches, and those derived from the cognate disciplines of practice in the several branches of practical theology. The disciplines of practical theology are often neglected or denigrated as techniques or "tricks of the trade." But the practical disciplines are, in fact, far more difficult and challenging than academic disciplines, where such virtues as doggedness, patience, and intelligence are sufficient to produce first-rate research. In the practical disciplines, however, there must be an integration of methodological clarity and sophistication with versatility, flexibility, and most of all the ability to take stock quickly and accurately of changing conditions in order to make appropriate modifications.

Seward Hiltner has diagrammed these practical disciplines in all their complexity in his *Preface to Pastoral Theology*.[16] Rather than summarizing his entire scheme, let me take one ministerial function as an illustration: the preparation and preaching of a sermon. Sermon *preparation* involves biblical exegesis and exposition, a pastoral reflection on current circumstances in the congregation and the wider world, and the pursuit of images, metaphors, and other literary elements to make the ideas creatively alive. The *preaching of* the sermon involves the skills of public speaking and related performing arts, the ability to sense the congregation's responses, to clarify obscure points on the spot, to extend points which are engaging the congregation reflectively, and to drop points which are clearly in trouble. Each of these aspects of preaching calls for a rich blend of reflec-

[15]E.g., Wilbert Moore, *The Professions: Roles and Rules* (New York: Russell Sage, 1970) or *The Professions in America,* ed. Kenneth S. Lynn (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1965).

[16]Seward Hiltner, *Preface to Pastoral Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958).

tion on theory and skilled practice, a lively self-critical sense which serves but does not impede direct communication, and a willingness to take new risks at potentially creative moments when the Spirit seems to be pushing beyond familiar limits.

If space permitted, a similar description could be offered for each of the practice areas of ministry. This one illustration demonstrates how the ministry must be professional in its integration of fundamental theory and research with skilled application, and with the kind of skill development which is reflectively self-critical and which itself integrates a diversity of methods and theories. And I believe that these are fitting expectations in any of the major Christian theologies of ministry, including Catholic sacramental theory, *since the fundamental theological argument of this essay is for a faithful stewardship of the gift of ministry*, not for one of the classical ecclesiologies.

But this argument for proper professional practice as faithful stewardship may be challenged at two other theological points—one is human finitude, and the expectation that any

minister could be adequately learned and skilled in all the ways described above. The second critique arises from the third-world and feminist perspectives cited earlier. If there is indeed something inherently oppressive in the role of the professional classes in society (however otherwise valuable their services may be), then the ministry of the church cannot be modeled after such oppressive hierarchies. The alternative models offered in third world and feminist analyses are those in which local leaders are recognized by their spiritual gifts, share leadership by working at other jobs while leading the faith community, and may *not* be formally educated at the graduate-professional level, but are more likely to pursue education by correspondence, extension, or self-directed studies.[17] While the white churches of North America and Europe face a different historical situation, they should, I believe, explore ways to profit from and adapt these new patterns in a time of post-triumphal Christendom and a resurgent right-wing culture-Christianity. But whatever emerges in the third world (and in the first world) as new patterns of ministerial leadership, the fundamental requirements of professional leadership outlined above should still be expected of such ministers, no matter how such leaders are called and educated, and however limited their time for leadership tasks. If they are not truly professional, the communities of faith will drift and languish. The artful-integration of theory and practice will continue to be normative for all leaders of the faith community.

B. *Beyond the professional: calling, character, charisma.* Earlier I argued that while ministerial leadership must be professional, it is also more than professional. There are many historic symbols and images for expressing those distinctly theological meanings of the ministerial office. The three categories used here—*calling, character, and charisma*—do not represent any single ecclesial tradition. But I hope they will allow me to bring together themes from many traditions.

Calling. In modern literature on the professions, *dedication to human welfare* is frequently identified as one distinguishing characteristic of a professional. The professional person must be dedicated to a larger purpose, however intrinsically

[17]An unpublished 1980 paper of "Sabbatical Reflections" by Dean H. E. Bradley of the Vancouver School of Theology outlines some of these possibilities.

and socially awarding the work of the professional may be. The dynamics of *dedication* and *calling* are surely very similar. But *calling* indicates a divine grounding of the ministry which dedication need not assume. God calls to ministry. All acts of ministry are finally accountable to God. God's call is mediated in many ways—the call to the ministry of the whole people of God in baptism and confirmation; the inner promptings of the heart; the special call through gifts and interests; ecclesiastical calls issuing in ordination or certification; and the call renewed daily in disciplines of prayer, study, institutional leadership, and responses to people in need. Standing behind and within all these mediations is the God who invites people to participate in the divine ministry of reconciliation and hope. Other professional persons may also name that name, and in faith ground all their endeavors in that promise. Yet that calling in faith is not intrinsic to their professional dedication or practice, but rather to their participation in the new humanity in Christ. In ministry that calling is foundational to every professional act.

Character. The professions which have formalized codes usually refer in some manner to the *ethical integrity* expected of its members. A higher level of integrity is expected, beyond

obeying the law or honoring the standards of conduct of the local community. While such integrity is also expected of the clergy, a better term for clergy character is *faithfulness,* which not only suggests attention to the tasks of ministry, but a fundamental orientation of the minister to Jesus Christ who is God's living word, calling the church into faithful and joyful sharing of Christ's ministry of reconciliation. This participation in the life and ministry of Christ suggests two dimensions of ministerial character which are less adequately expressed by the word integrity. The first dimension is the "already present" character of the new age of God which Christ has begun, freeing the minister from the burden of creating goodness in an evil world, and freeing the minister to help the community of faith discern and celebrate the new life which Christ has already brought to light. The second dimension of faithfulness as a mark of ministerial character is the "not yet but assured" quality of that new age, providing hope and confidence in the ultimate triumph of goodness, and calling for active participation in the struggles to achieve the justice and love which Christ gives and promises in that new age.

Charisma. Most professional screening and educational systems are keenly attuned to those qualities and abilities which are likely to predict professional success. Added to these are the skills developed in experience and the artfulness and wisdom which emerge in the mature professional. All such "gifts" are to be found in the professional ministry, but their source and character are differently identified. These gifts are seen as spiritual, provided by the very Spirit of God which comforts, guides, enlightens, and inspires the people of God as they struggle to minister faithfully. This spiritual attribution of the gifts of ministry should never foster an undisciplined approach to the tasks of ministry. Indeed there is a "ministry formation" process in which the gifts of the Spirit are seen at work in a deeply transforming and permanent manner in the Catholic traditions. Even where Protestant traditions hold a functional view of the relation of gifts of ministry to the person of the minister, their liturgies of ordination and procedures for assessing qualifications still express a clear awareness that such gifts must be deepened and disciplined and become part of the character of the minister. But these gifts are also mysterious. They can be simulated but not humanly manufac-

tured. The minister must be radically open, deeply attuned to the promised Spirit, but cannot compel its presence. Those specifically gifted moments, known intuitively by all professionals, scholars and artists, are the times of the Spirit, in which the human bearers become miraculously transparent to the divine reality present in all appearances. The community of faith names that mysterious power and presence as the Holy Spirit of God, without which faithful ministry could not occur.

V

These three marks of genuine ministry—calling, character and charisma—are theological designations for qualities which are found in other professions, but differently named. In ministry the divine source of these qualities is clearly affirmed. Competent professional practice in ministry requires the acknowledgement of these three qualities. Professional skill can never make up for their absence. Professional ineptitude can, however, distort or block the full expression of ministry. Therefore a part of the faithfulness of ministerial character, in response to the divine call to receive and share the gifts of the Spirit, is the most disciplined practice possible in all the professional tasks of ministry.