



Ministry in the American Culture: Theological and Cultural Considerations

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It is not an easy time to be engaged in Christian ministry. A bewildering potpourri of competing themes and demands confronts the Christian minister in contemporary American culture.¹ Difficulties arise within the theological and institutional life of the church; these are compounded through interaction with the life of the broader community. Within the church there is tension over what authorizes ministry and whom to designate a “minister.” An unsettling feeling exists in some quarters that the discussion is little more than an argument over the arrangement of the chairs on the deck of the Titanic. In contrast, the wider culture or, more specifically, the mass culture regards the minister at best as an obligatory, sentimental functionary for christenings, marriages, and rituals of denial at grave side (so portrayed, for example, in TV soap operas) and at worst as either an irrelevant, perhaps even hypocritical moralist (e.g., in sitcoms) or simply a swindler (e.g., in docudramas).² Between the conflict within the church over the character of ministry and the contempt or patronizing tolerance for ministry within the wider culture, it is difficult to be a Christian minister.

¹The phrase “American culture” is used broadly in this essay. Although there is obviously no single culture in the United States, there are factors (esp. television) which tend to level out differences and make it possible to speak of a cultural “we.” The terms “ministry” and “minister” as used here refer to all ministry conducted within or in behalf of a Christian community. Institutional, public accountability is assumed, and therefore the terms do not here designate the witness and service that every Christian performs.

²Grant Wacker, in a discussion of how the “Evangelical Right” perceives the portrayal of Christianity by the “arbiters of contemporary culture,” provides a succinct summary of the negative depictions: “Religious conviction emerges as fanaticism, self-discipline as prudery, and sharing one’s faith as zealotry” (“Searching for Norman Rockwell: Popular Evangelicalism in Contemporary America” in *The Evangelical Tradition in America*, ed. by Leonard I. Sweet [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984] 302).

I. INHERENT DIFFICULTIES IN CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Part of the difficulty of Christian ministry derives from the nature of the Christian faith. That faith is inherently dialectical: God/human, transcendent/immanent, already/not yet, sinner/saint, temporal/eternal. We *witness* to God’s concrete action in Jesus of Nazareth and yet speak of hope in things *not seen*. Since dialectical assertions are embedded in the central Christian claims, it is not surprising that Christian ministry is also dialectical both in practice and theory: the Christian minister is called and authorized by a Christian congregation to conduct a ministry grounded in and authorized by the gospel of Jesus Christ. The first authorization is sociological, the second theological.

If we are serious about ministry with, among, and for people, the theological reality should not be pitted against the sociological reality. As with other dialectics in Christian faith and life, the tensions cannot be resolved by institutional or intellectual structures which attempt to balance the contrastive thrusts. It is not a matter of balanced proportions; the “resolution” (if that term is to be used) is a matter of being sustained and being faithful until Christ comes again.

The most elementary aspect of the sociological reality is the employment of ministers by the consensus of a voluntarily assembled group—at least such is the case in most American churches. The minister is accountable in either a direct or *de facto* manner to members of the church. The potential for tension and even disaster is obvious: a servile ministry may be demanded or too readily offered.

The second authorization is a theological reality. Both the minister and congregation are accountable to the living Christ in whose name they gather for worship, service, and proclamation. A Christian congregation (as *Christian*) is legitimated only by the grace and promise of Christ. If it is constituted on other bases, much good may result, much meaning may be found; and much satisfaction may be felt, but such benefits should not be confused with what constitutes, authorizes, justifies, and empowers the Christian community and its ministry. The congregation in order to hear from Christ rather than itself subordinates its authority to the authority of the gospel of Christ. The congregation entrusts a minister with accountability to the gospel before accountability to itself, in effect freeing the minister from itself. This freedom is the foundation of a prophetic ministry. It is not, however, a license, for the freedom of Christian ministry does not reside in the person of the minister; *freedom* in ministry is *bound* to Christ and exists for ministering to Christ’s people, the Christian congregation.

The sociological and the theological realities do not easily coexist. For example, the evaluation of the adequacy of a given ministry is inherently ambiguous. Which criterion is central: effectiveness or faithfulness? The power of Christian ministry lies outside of the capacities of its practitioners; it resides in the capacity of Christ to keep his promise. This is freeing, but awkward, for the power of Christian ministry cannot be indisputably demonstrated. The effectiveness of a gospel-centered ministry is finally the work of the Spirit of Christ. Consequently, faithful witness to the promise of Christ around which the church is gathered and by which it is constituted is the primary measure of Christian ministry. Effective leadership, however, is most useful in the practice of Christian ministry, for Christian ministry is never disembodied, and effective bodies are better than ineffective bodies.

The ambiguities inherent in the dual authorization of Christian ministry are intensified by sin, to use what has become a quaint if not banished term in popular American culture. Congregations—even the best of them—are never so good that a minister is exempted from praying “thy kingdom come.” From the congregation’s viewpoint, there can be suspicion—not always unfounded—that the authority of the minister is being wielded more for power than for service, that the authority is not a vehicle of the gospel’s claim but chiefly the minister’s. Congregations and ministers jointly confess that the Spirit “calls, gathers, and enlightens” the whole Christian church, but congregations too readily, particularly in their expectations and evaluations, demand that ministers become the subject of those verbs, and alas, ministers all too often forget that they are not the subject of those verbs.

The uneasy coexistence of the theological and sociological realities make Christian ministry inherently difficult. To say that ministry is not easy is to state the obvious, but it must be stated, for it is too easy to turn Jesus' words about an easy burden and a light yoke into a trivial piety generated more from the impulse to deny reality than from trusting the promise of Christ. Christian ministry has been, is, and will remain difficult until the rule of Christ and the appearance of "things not seen" are apparent to all. In the meantime, the difficulties can be endured because Christ sustains and will not forsake Christian ministry.

II. AMERICAN CULTURE: COMPOUNDING THE DIFFICULTIES

The inherent difficulties of Christian ministry are compounded by ambivalent and contradictory emphases in current American culture. Even if we can gain enough distance from our culture to form some assessment of its tensions, we are nevertheless shaped by it. The number of cultural currents that can be discussed here is necessarily limited. Two have been selected for this essay: the deeply embedded emphases on *now* and the *self*.³

Now

The concern with *now* is ubiquitous. Everything valued is seemingly new or at least improved, and, when the past is recognized, it is chiefly done in a romanticized or nostalgic form. This is not all bad, for one can readily admit that much about the past was not good; some things have become better! A much lower percentage of humanity fears starvation during the winter than was the case during preceding centuries, and polio no longer terrorizes us during the summer months. Repentance for much of the past was and is needed, and many of the ways of the past were and are in need of repair.

Necessary alterations, however, do not warrant the widespread contempt for the past. Through the advertisements in our magazines we beckon ourselves with words like "newest," "latest," "state-of-the-art," "instantly," and the like. "Classic" often means no more than classy or expensive. The attitude is present both in popular and academic culture: history is "bunk," "boring," or "dry" to some groups and "oppressive" or merely a "perspective" to others.

This situation is ironically attributable in some measure to our historical consciousness. We have learned that not all space has been or is like our space, and

³For a more wide-ranging list and discussion than is possible here, see the very convenient and succinct summary of the characteristics of modernity which Robert Benne provides in the opening pages of *Ordinary Saints: An Introduction to the Christian Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

not all time has been or will be like our time. Historical consciousness has unmasked and relativized the absolute claims of tradition. Tradition has been reduced to "just a matter of perspective"—an assertion deeply embedded in our culture, having spread across all economic, educational and other demographically identifiable groupings. Wittingly or unwittingly, we have become chronocentric, concentrating on the now. As a culture, we assemble our lives with dreams of a legacy, but we will not accept the claims of prior legacies. We fancy that we will live on in our children's memory, but we caricature the world of our parents. The optimism we have about now is dogged by our own cynicism with regard to the past and its bearers.⁴

The emphasis on now both resonates with and subverts Christian ministry. On the

positive side, we know that Christian ministry ought not seek escape from the present. Christ is a living Lord and, both temporally and spatially, *this* is God's world. The Christian minister must be engaged in the now. Escapist nostalgia and pie-in-the-sky longings are not signs of faithful ministry. This is central to the Christian witness. For example, "God loves you" and "God forgives you" are always present tense, here-and-now assertions. To lock such affirmations into the past or the contingent future is to diminish their pastoral impact. God loves people, not theoretically, but in their flesh-and-blood, here-and-now particularity. Accepting our creatureliness—our dust-to-dust and ashes-to-ashes character—involves an affirmation of the now that we have been given by God. In this respect at least, our culture's emphasis on now resonates with a proper emphasis in Christian ministry.

However, the concern for now also subverts Christian ministry. Concern for now has an atomizing effect and leaves us captive to the isolation of a present that pivots only around itself. The "communion of saints" becomes an empty credal piety in a world that is obsessed with now. "Where I'm at" becomes the slogan that expresses the absolutist now which dismisses all impinging alternatives but nevertheless reserves for itself the right to a new now at any moment.

It is not an exaggeration to state that First Commandment concerns are at stake in this chronocentrism. The past is an "unchangeable other" which claims us. We can and do argue about how the past is to be narrated and who is to do the narration, but we cannot remake the past. With regard to the past, we are receptors, not creators. How we come to grips with the world that has shaped us and now claims us is in some measure a test of whether or not we can come to grips with the primary (and only absolute) other, God.

Tradition, obviously, does not equal God, and oppressive traditions and their bearers are not to be docilely honored. Nevertheless, it is tragic and fraudulent, for example, to argue for and dream of inclusive ministries and churches while disparaging, caricaturing, or simply being embarrassed by the heritage and world of our

⁴Ben Stein, a TV scriptwriter, describes the TV manifestation of this attitude: "There is no wisdom in one's elders, and the past offers no guides to the present....To put it more clearly, if you come across someone who is full of folk wisdom and homilies, he may be: an Archie Bunker racist slob, however lovable; a con man, *a la* innumerable adventure and comedy shows; a small-town sheriff out to murder the innocent, a staple of any TV show about crime; or a fool, like the senator of 'All's Fair.' The good people on television are slick-looking men and women, up-to-the-minute, lithe and thin, in flashy cars and flashy clothes. The kindly housewife of Ozzie and Harriet has been utterly displaced by Farrah Fawcett" (*The View from Sunset Boulevard: America as Brought to You by the People Who Make Television* [Garden City: Anchor Books, 1980] 121). Stein first published this assessment in 1979, and a decade later not much has changed—"The Rosanne Barr Show," various watchdog groups, and cable access notwithstanding.

parents. If our corrections of our inherited traditions are not coupled with a respect for those very same traditions, there is little chance that we will respect and honor in any profound or God-pleasing way the traditions of our Asian, Hispanic, or other neighbors. In a culture obsessed with now, we are deeply tempted to use the new more to irk our parents who are like us and on whom we are dependent than to open ourselves to be servants to those who are not like us. The now emphasis subtly, threatens to turn ministry into a shallow declaration of independence, a mere (but interminable) adolescent fit. And then, tragically, God is not honored and the neighbor is not served.

Self

A second ambivalent characteristic of current American culture is an inordinate concern with the self. This theme is related to the deep-seated concern with the now.⁵ Severed from the past, we are left alone. We may form now-centered networks, but the “we” rapidly becomes only a collection of “I’s.” Although we complain about rugged individualism and snicker at songs like “I Did It My Way,” our attachments to communities are shallow. The self is restive with the traditions and binding commitments that are inherent requirements of communal life. The self insists on establishing its own place; one must create one’s own meaning.

How this is possible is unclear, for “meaning” needs a community that concurs with the judgment that this or that was/is, in fact, “meaningful.” Self-referential assessments of meaning have no stability and offer no enduring direction. Consequently, others (that is, our neighbors) are coerced into the projects of the self.⁶ Ann Swidler captures the result precisely when she observes regarding our culture, “What [has become] valuable about a relationship is ‘what one gets out of it.’ One values what one can learn from another person, what one can take away from the experience. One is valued in turn for what he gives in exchange.” The dominant metaphors are that of “exchange” and, as Swidler points out, such metaphors “imply impermanence.”⁷ Seemingly the only restraint on this mutual plundering in the interest of the self is the requirement that the other be a “consenting” adult.

Niche marketing is another sign of the concern for self; there is something for everyone. We cannot claim to be innocent victims of such merchandising, for the advertising merely reflects rhetoric we use in justifying our actions in deeds both mundane and monumental. We demand a choice; a life without choice is regarded as a life with diminished worth. Our most highly valued efforts are inward-di-

⁵In the summer of 1989 an insert in the Sunday newspaper announced a new perfume called “Spectacular” by Joan Collins. The lead line read: “Why be anything but...Spectacular.” The smaller print clearly joined the self-referential themes of *now* and self. “It’s a shopping spree on Rodeo Drive. It’s knowing no limit on your credit card. It’s looking great in everything you bought. It’s returning nothing. Ever. It’s a feeling you may get once in a lifetime, or all your life. It’s Spectacular. It’s original. It’s only by Joan Collins.” A perfume marketed under Cher’s name puts the combination even more succinctly in its commercial copy: “Uninhibited by Cher. Bottled, but not contained.” Whatever limits might be conceded in the word “bottled,” obviously nothing will be allowed to restrain the now-centered, expressive self.

⁶Walter Brueggemann expresses it well in *The Creative Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982): “Without the holiness of God, the justice of neighbor becomes a crusade rather than a vocation” (37).

⁷Ann Swidler, “Love and Adulthood in American Culture,” in *Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, ed. Robert N. Bellah et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 119. She adds, “What is good about a relationship is not the commitment it embodies, but how much a person learns about himself from the relationship. Love is not the emblem of a crystallized identity but the mandate for continuing self-exploration” (117).

rected,⁸ the outer world being either restrictive, authoritarian, oppressive, or sterile. Crafts and skills which involve disciplines are replaced by “creative” arts. Perhaps the ultimate sign of our culture’s capitulation to the self is the U. S. Army’s recruitment slogan: “Be all you can be!” When even the Army’s regulated, disciplined life is marketed with self-realization rhetoric, one can no longer deny the dominance of the self.

There are, however, positive dimensions to the concern for self. Self-understanding helps many people break destructive patterns—patterns which the outer world had created and

reinforced. The value placed on self-fulfillment helps sustain efforts to protect and even extricate children and spouses from abusive family members. Our communities are enriched by the talents of people who have been freed to be self-expressive; much new and re-energized productivity has resulted and, if not productivity, then just plain ordinary joy and satisfaction. The outgrowth of the emphasis on self must in many respects be endorsed; even the most nostalgic among us would concede that some elements are for the better.

The Christian minister may (and in some ways must) speak and act in a manner parallel to that of our self-oriented society. There should be no doubt about the worth of each individual: each person is a creature of God and one for whom Christ died. Anything that erodes the God-given worth of each person is not only destructive to the person, but also a defiance of God's prerogatives as creator and redeemer. "Be all you can be" can be a doxological and service-oriented expression, for failure to use all the gifts one has been given is to fail to serve the neighbor fully and to squander what one has been given by God. There is no Christian rationale for masochistic deprivation; refrains such as "this is but a veil of tears" and "I am but a worm" do not speak the full truth about the life we have been given.

Christian ministry, however, can easily become captive to the narcissistic ethic of the self. All too often there is a demand that ministers be "accepting," with the clear implication that there is no room for them to say no. We should say no, but we ourselves highly value tolerance as a virtue and confuse it with the embrace of God's forgiveness. Forgiveness is reduced to acceptance. We know forgiveness is a meaningless term without terms like sin and guilt, but the latter terms seem too negative and unaffirming. The focus of ministry becomes serving the "needs" of people, and, in a culture absorbed in the self, the chief need is to "find oneself." We feel intensely the demand to assist people in their search—their search for a lost or obscured "original blessing." Absolution is out, for there is no "original" or more recent sin—only correctable "mistakes."⁹ We can deal with suffering but not sin.

⁸The premium we place on the inner versus the outer world is poignantly depicted in a scene in John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick* (New York: Knopf, 1984). In the small New England town of Eastwick, a "band of teen-agers hung out in front of the Superette, waiting for the psychedelic-painted VW van the drug dealer from south Providence drove....Martyrs of a sort they were, these children, along with the town drunk, in his basketball sneakers and buttonless overcoat, draining blackberry brandy from a paper bag as he sat on his bench in Kazmierczak Square, risking nightly death by exposure; martyrs too of a sort were the men and women hastening to adulterous trysts, risking disgrace and divorce for their fix of motel love—all sacrificing the outer world to the inner, proclaiming with this priority that everything solid-seeming and substantial is in fact a dream, of less account than a merciful rush of feeling" (201).

⁹The preferred language seems to be that of "mistake." Public personalities such as Rob Lowe, Pete Rose, and Gary Hart, political entities as diverse as the Sandinistas and the Contras, and private conversations everywhere appeal to the language of "mistakes" or "poor judgment" over against words like "bad," "sin," or "wrong." The banishment of the terminology of sin (and the recognition of the reality about which it speaks) was clearly illustrated in the public mockery of President Carter when he admitted that he had lusted in his heart. No wonder our culture is hampered in coping with victims, for "mistakes" have no victims with claims on the perpetrators.

Confident or certain hope is regarded as a sign of arrogance and imperialism; doubt and ambiguity become primary virtues and signs of a "mature" faith.¹⁰ The Christian faith becomes a resource for the transformation of selves but not a truth which is to be transmitted from generation to generation. Empathy is in demand; proclamation is scorned. The demands of the

self are pervasive in congregational life, and their effect on Christian ministry is all too often corrosive.

The parishioners, however, are not the only ones who express this attitude. We ministers, before we complain too bitterly about the demanding self-centeredness of parishioners and the wider culture, ought to listen to our own language as we speak of ministry. “*My* ministry”—how does the pronoun “my” work in that phrase? Obviously, the mere occurrence of the expression does not warrant charging a minister with self-centeredness. Nevertheless, notice how easily “*my*” ministry slides into “*my style* of ministry”—the language then becomes just one more instance of the cultural obsession with self-expression. My style merges with my “need” to be a minister. My inner authorization threatens to displace the dual authorization of Christian ministry in the call of a congregation and the promise of Christ. Ministry then lasts only as long as I “need” that form of self-realization; it is made contingent on my needs. A quest for self-realization through ministry domesticates ministry as readily as does any manipulation of the minister’s economic dependence on a congregation. The effects of such domestication are pernicious, for they threaten to obscure if not simply overshadow the central grounding of congregation and minister in Christ. Likability becomes a higher priority than faithfulness. We ministers may complain of the macerating, blackmailing effect of an evaluative criterion such as likability, but we diminish our grounds for complaint and sympathy when we construe ministry on a self-realization basis.

It is not an easy time to be engaged in Christian ministry. The difficulties are inherent and they are compounded by cultural trends. Christian ministry is charged with accountability to Christ whose rule is finally not of this world, and yet that world shapes our habits—for good and for ill. We who are “in the world but not of the world” have no other world to which we can retreat; we must minister here. Summonses to repentance for “backsliding” are often justifiable, but sweeping condemnations of the culture and each other seldom acknowledge the difficulties and ambiguities of faithful Christian ministry in every age and culture. Soberminded examination of the tensions and temptations can provide understanding and perhaps even wisdom. Even more, however, we need to encourage one another in the gospel itself. With the authorization of the gospel of Christ, we can turn to each other—minister to minister—and say, “The Lord bless you and keep you.” Held in the grace of Christ, we can commend each other to “go in peace and serve the Lord.” The gospel which is proclaimed *through* us is also the gospel proclaimed *to* us. Thanks be to God.

¹⁰Leonard I. Sweet, commenting on the legacies of the ’60s, states, “Conventional Protestantism abandoned evangelism less because of a tight-lipped faith than because its faith was devoid of declarations. In the words of one prominent church leader, the best strategy for evangelism was honesty and kindness: ‘I’m as lost as you are. But I promise not to leave you alone in your search’” (“The 1960s: The Crisis of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism,” in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984] 42).