

Introduction

Vaughan Roberts

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples: 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'

Matthew 9 v 35-38

PEOPLE TODAY ARE NO DIFFERENT to those Jesus met in the first century; they are 'harassed and helpless'. Can we see them as they really are, in all their desperate need? We are surrounded by those who are lost, separated from God and facing eternity without Him, 'like sheep without a shepherd'. Do we have compassion on them?

Jesus did. And His compassion led to action. He saw a vast harvest waiting to be gathered in, but hardly any workers to do the job. So He issued an instruction to His followers: 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field' (Matthew 9 v 38).

That command still applies today. Although 2000 years of Christian witness have passed, there are still millions in our world who have never even heard the name of Christ. Vast areas of Asia, North Africa and the Middle East have been largely untouched by the gospel. Even in countries where many profess to be Christians there is great ignorance. There is still a desperate need for workers

to be sent into the harvest field to reach the world and build the church. Ultimately, it is God who must send them (as Jesus does at the beginning of Matthew 10, sending out the twelve) but we are called to play our part as well. Jesus tells us to pray. That, in essence, is the 9:38 challenge. If we begin to see the world as Jesus sees it, we cannot do nothing. We must share our Lord's compassion and seek to do all we can for those who do not know Him. Will we commit ourselves to urgent prayer that He would be raising up, training and sending out suitably godly and gifted workers to serve Him in His world? And will we pray about our own role in this vital task?

This book is written for disciples of Jesus Christ who are willing to do just that. You have put your trust in Him and have received His gift of salvation. You know that all Christians are ministers of Christ, called to serve Him in the world and the church, and you have already begun to do that in various ways. But now you are wondering how you can best serve Him with the rest of your life.

These pages attempt to describe the nature of gospel ministry, and to answer the questions that those who are considering it may have. The aim is not to persuade everyone that they should give up their present jobs and offer themselves as workers to churches and missionary organisations. We all have different gifts. Some are suited to this kind of work, others are best used in other ways. We must resist the idea that some jobs are better or more 'spiritual' than others. But we should all be asking ourselves this question: 'What is it that I could do, as the person I am and with the gifts that God has given me, that would most bring glory to God through the spread of the gospel?' For some that will mean staying where they are; for others it will mean a significant change of direction. Before reading any further, spend a moment praying that this book would help you discern how best you can use your life for God's glory. And pray the prayer of Matthew 9 v 38: that God would send out workers into His harvest field.

SECTION 1:
***What is
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A CHURCH LISTED THE NAMES of its staff members with their positions on its notice board. At the top of the list was the line: *Ministers: the whole congregation*. They had understood the Bible's teaching. The biblical word translated 'minister' simply means 'servant'. All Christians are called to full-time Christian service, serving Christ with the whole of their lives. This ministry, however, can take many different forms. In this chapter we will consider four pairs of characteristics to help us understand the nature of gospel ministry, which is one particular type of Christian service.

Gospel ministry

1. Two forms: universal and particular
2. Two priorities: word and prayer
3. Two roles: servant and leader
4. Two expectations: joy and suffering

1. Two forms: universal and particular

Gospel ministry comes in two forms. It is a responsibility for all Christian believers, but only some are set apart specifically for the task.

Universal: All Christians are called to engage in gospel ministry

As we will see, gospel ministry is the ministry of God's Word to both Christians and non-Christians. That is a task for us all. The responsibility of speaking to crowds of non-Christians is rightly entrusted to those who are especially gifted as evangelistic preachers or apologists. But all believers have the responsibility to make the most of the opportunities God gives us to share the gospel with our families, colleagues, neighbours and friends. Paul assumes that the whole Philippian church is to 'hold out the word of life' to the 'crooked and depraved generation' among whom they live (Philippians 2 v 15-16). And Peter tells his readers that they should 'always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have' (1 Peter 3 v 15).

All Christians also have a ministry of God's Word in the church. It is not just the leaders or staff of a church who are to be engaged in pastoral ministry. We all have a responsibility to spur each other on in the Christian life with reminders of God's truth:

Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. (Hebrews 10 v 24)

Encourage one another and build each other up. (1 Thess 5 v 11)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another. (Colossians 3 v 16)

Particular: Some Christians are set apart for gospel ministry

When Titus was left by Paul on Crete to care for the young church that had just been established there, his first task was to appoint 'elders' in every town (Titus 1 v 5). They were not to be 'one-man bands', but rather, to function in teams. Elsewhere, these leaders

are referred to as 'overseers', or 'bishops' (Acts 20 v 28; Philippians 1 v 1; Titus 1 v 7) and 'pastors' (1 Peter 5 v 2). The different titles are used interchangeably and speak of the same office. Some of the elders continued with other jobs, like Paul with his tent-making. Others were supported by the church to enable them to give all their time to the task (1 Timothy 5 v 17-18). Some churches today also employ children's, youth and women's workers and evangelists.

There is nothing that these workers do that is barred to other Christians. Their ministry is simply a particular expression of a universal responsibility. They are never called 'priests' in the New Testament. Since Christ, the great high priest, perfectly bridged the gap between us and His Father through His death on the cross, there is no longer any need for mediators between us and God as there was under the old covenant. The church does not have a priesthood; *it is a priesthood*. We are a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2 v 9), called to be God's witnesses in the world. So there is no fundamental distinction between 'ordinary' Christians and those who are set apart for some form of gospel ministry. As we have seen, all Christians have a ministry, including a ministry of God's Word; but some are especially set apart for such a ministry.

2. Two priorities: word and prayer

Just before Jesus ascended into heaven He left some final instructions to His followers: 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1 v 8). It must have seemed an impossible task for his tiny band of unimpressive followers, who just days before had deserted him after his arrest. But the command came with a promise: 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you' (Acts 1 v 8). That power was evident in the dramatic early days of the church as it grew rapidly in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Even the threat of

persecution made no difference. But then, in Acts 6, Luke records a potential crisis that threatened to arrest the advance of the gospel. A dispute arose over the church's distribution of food to poor widows, with the Grecian Jews complaining that their widows were being neglected, while the Hebraic Jews were well provided for. Everyone looked to the apostles to sort out the problem, but they refused to get involved.

As will become evident in chapter 3, there is no suggestion that caring for the poor in the church is not a Christian duty. The apostles knew that the job had to be done, but they were equally clear that they were not the ones to do it: 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables' (Acts 6 v 2). The church was to appoint seven others to take responsibility for the widows so that the apostles could give their attention to 'prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6 v 4). As a result, the crisis was averted. The church's leaders were not deflected from the two great responsibilities with which they had been entrusted. Consequently, Luke can write: 'so the word of God spread' (Acts 6 v 7).

A ministry of the Word

Gospel ministry is Word ministry. It is by His Word that God calls people to belong to Christ in the first place. Paul reminds the Ephesians: 'you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation' (Ephesians 1 v 13). It is also by His Word that we grow in our knowledge and love of Christ. Speaking of God's Word, Peter writes: 'Like new born babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation' (1 Peter 2 v 2). If the world is to be reached and the church is to be built up, it is vital that many with gifts of teaching and preaching are set apart to minister God's Word and that they stick to that task and do not get deflected.

In his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders Paul exhorted them: ‘Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood’ (Acts 20 v 28). If we have been given oversight of other Christians, whether as a pastor, women’s or youth worker or small group leader, we have the great privilege of caring for some of God’s flock. The New Testament is clear that our chief responsibility is to provide them with good food by teaching God’s truth from the Scriptures. Paul was a model for the Ephesian elders to follow. He reminded them: ‘I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house’ (Acts 20 v 20).

He urged Timothy, one of the leaders of the church in Ephesus: ‘devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching (1 Timothy 4 v 13)... Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction’ (4 v 1-2). He also told Titus what kind of man he should appoint as an elder on Crete: ‘He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it’ (Titus 1 v 9).

There is an urgent need for many more gospel workers who have a clear sense of the priority of God’s Word. Others, both Christian or non-Christian, may provide food for the hungry, education for the ignorant and healthcare for the sick, but who will provide for their spiritual needs by pointing them to Christ? ‘And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone speaking to them?’ (Romans 10 v 14). Perhaps the church could do with a better magazine, tidier garden or bigger building; these are all valuable things to work at. But it *cannot* do without God’s Word. So those entrusted with the

task of teaching that Word must stick to it, even if that means disappointing congregation members who expect them to do a multitude of other jobs.

It may be that the youth group at the church down the road is bursting with young people, but that in itself is not a reason to copy its methods. Games, music and social events do not *in themselves* produce Christian disciples; that is God's work by His Spirit through His Word. And so, even if we organise a range of activities, Bible teaching must be right at the centre. We must maintain the priority of God's Word in all we do.

Prayer

The Lord Jesus was God incarnate and yet He still saw the need to pray. The gospels frequently refer to Him doing so (eg: Mark 1 v 35). The apostle Paul was also a man of prayer. He was a dedicated intercessor for the Christians in his care. For example, he told the Ephesian Christians: 'ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers' (Ephesians 1 v 15-16).

An Evangelical Alliance survey of pastors found that seven out of ten felt overworked. In a typical sixty-hour week they spent an average of twenty-two hours on administration, but only thirty-eight minutes in personal prayer¹. Here is another fundamental aspect of gospel ministry that is too quickly pushed down the list of priorities. Alongside the ministry of God's Word, there must be a commitment to pray.

¹ Quoted in Steven Croft, 'Ministry in Three Dimensions' p.17-18, Barton, Longman and Todd, London, 1999.

We should start by praying for ourselves. First and foremost I am a Christian, not a Christian worker. Unless I give time to nurturing my own relationship with Christ I will not be in a position to help anyone else grow in theirs. A book on secular leadership stresses the importance of ‘sharpening the saw’. It tells a story of a man watching another try to cut down a tree with a blunt saw. He asks him: ‘Why don’t you sharpen the saw?’ The reply comes: ‘I haven’t got time for that; I have to cut down this tree’². The application in this context is obvious. If we are to have any hope of being sharp and effective in Christ’s service we must spend conscious time in His presence, studying the scriptures and praying. As Thomas Chalmers wrote: ‘no solid, permanent work of God can be expected where the piety and spirituality of the instrument is low, whatever His gifts may be.’³

As well as praying for ourselves and our own spiritual growth, we should also pray for those with whom we work. Once again, Paul is an inspiring and challenging example, not just by the quantity of his prayers but by their depth. He tells the Philippians: ‘And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God’ (Philippians 1 v 9-11).

Don Carson comments: ‘Do you desire with all your heart what is best for the congregation you serve? Then you must ask yourself how much time you devote to praying this sort of prayer... Once our priorities are straight, we will learn to relegate tasks to their

2 Quoted in Croft p.112-113

3 Quoted in ‘D Martyn Lloyd-Jones—the fight of faith’ Volume 2 p.762, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1990.

appropriate rank according to the values of scripture. Delegate some things; cancel others. You do not need to have a bulletin; you have to pray. You do not have to chair every committee or attend every meeting; you have to pray'.⁴

3. Two roles: servant and leader

Servant

All Christian ministry should flow out of the ministry of Christ to us. Although He was 'in very nature God' He 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... and became obedient to death—even death on a cross' (Philippians 2 v 6-8). He 'did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10 v 45). That example of sacrificial service is to be our model as we seek to follow Him.

As a young Christian, I was made President of the university Christian Union and began to think I was rather special. I was used to spiritual leadership so I imagined that I would be given an important job when I was asked to lead at a camp for teenagers that summer. In fact, my chief responsibility was to ensure that the toilet rolls around the site were frequently replenished. It was an important lesson. Whatever our position we are, above all, servants. Jesus said: 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all' (Mark 10 v 43-44).

Paul had a position of great authority as an apostle of Christ, but his preferred self-description was 'servant [or 'slave'] of Jesus Christ' (eg: Romans 1 v 1). He said: 'we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake' (2 Corinthians 4 v 5). He served Christ by serving others. He

4 Don Carson 'Call to Spiritual Reformation' p.133, IVP, Leicester, 1992.

saw his work as a continuation of Christ's work, speaking of 'what Christ has accomplished through me' (Romans 15 v 18). He had no desire to gain a following for himself. His only goal was to glorify Christ by pointing others to Him.

At the height of his popularity as a guru, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh had 93 Rolls Royces. When he was finally arrested by U.S. Marshals he was wearing 35 platinum and gold watches.⁵ There are many like him, sadly even in Christian churches, who seek personal gain from religious leadership through prosperity, popularity or power. But we should be focused, not on what we can gain, but on what we can give. George Whitefield was probably the greatest of all British evangelists. He was a household name in the eighteenth century and yet he used to say: 'Let the name of Whitefield perish, so long as Christ is exalted'.⁶

Do we only imagine serving Christ in a comfortable area with which we are familiar or in a well-known church where we might make a name for ourselves? Or would we be prepared to go to another culture or a tough estate, where we could work for years, largely unnoticed? In our dreams for the future do we aim, above all, to serve ourselves or to serve Christ?

Leader

Most gospel workers have some kind of leadership role. That is certainly true of pastors. Paul urges the Thessalonians to 'respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord' (1 Thess 5 v 12). The writer to the Hebrews says: 'Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you' (Hebrews 13 v 7).

5 Sunday Times 9th June 1996

6 J. C. Ryle '18th Century Christian Leaders' p.58, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh, 1978.

There is no contradiction between these two roles of servant and leader. If God gives us spiritual responsibility for others we should not allow a false humility to prevent us from fulfilling it. Christian leaders should lead. But they do so as servants, recognising that they are accountable to a higher authority. We may be ‘shepherds of God’s flock’ (1 Peter 5 v 2), but Jesus alone is ‘the Chief Shepherd’ (1 Peter 5 v 4). We may have authority over others, but we should use it for their good, not ours: ‘not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock’ (5 v 2-3).

4. Two expectations: joy and suffering

I had two surprises when I started full-time gospel work. It was even better than I had expected; and yet it was also far harder. The words of John Newton and William Cowper in one of their Olney Hymns continue to describe my experience:

*What contradictions meet
In ministers employ;
It is a bitter sweet,
A sorrow full of joy.*⁷

Joy

After Paul had heard encouraging news from Timothy about the growth of the young Christians he had led to Christ in Thessalonica, he wrote: ‘now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?’ (1 Thess 3 v 8-9).

⁷ Quoted in Handley Moule ‘To my younger Brethren’ p.1, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1892.

The pastor who first encouraged me to consider gospel ministry told me: 'It's a never-ending job which is all-consuming and often exhausting, but it's an enormous privilege. I sometimes have to pinch myself when I think that I'm actually being paid to be doing something I love and would want to be doing anyway. It's a great thrill to spend most of my time engaged in a work where the fruit lasts for eternity'.

I could say the same. It is wonderful to see Christians growing to maturity in Christ, and nothing beats the excitement of being involved in another's conversion. One young man slipped a note under my door a day after we had had a conversation in which I had urged him to turn to Christ. It simply said: 'I've done it—it's wonderful!' There was joy in heaven, and there was great joy on earth too.

Suffering

Gospel ministry is certainly not all joy: there will also be suffering. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'death is at work in us, but life is at work in you' (2 Corinthians 4 v 12). Just as Jesus had to suffer and die before we could receive His gift of life, so His servants will endure much hardship as they seek to share His life with others.

If we set our hearts on doing some form of gospel ministry in the future, we desire a 'noble task' (1 Timothy 3 v 1). But not everyone will see it that way. The world will not be impressed by those who preach the weak and foolish message of Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1 v 22-25). Like Paul, we can also expect opposition from within the church. He wrote: 'Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world' (1 Corinthians 4 v 13).

We must not adopt an unrealistic, glamourised view of gospel ministry. Do not imagine yourself preaching to hundreds at a con-

vention, or leading scores to Christ in a mission. It is not often like that. Most gospel ministry is a long hard slog. It is slow work with little visible fruit and, as Jesus teaches in the Parable of the Sower, even some of that does not last.

But we have good reason to persevere, even in the hardest times. Christ is with us by His Spirit, as He promised (Matthew 28 v 20; Acts 1 v 8) and one day He will return to gather in the harvest. Only then will we see the awesome results of gospel ministry down the ages: 'a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb' (Revelation 7 v 9).