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I'm a Minister...

The concept of 'ministry' is much misunderstood in the modern church of God

by James McBride

The words may be spoken with great authority - or in humility. They may be arrogantly handed down from the mount, with no response permitted. Or they may simply be an expression of availability to serve.

The role of minister has been hideously distorted within modern Christianity, where title has been piled on increasingly obscure title. The Churches of God are not exempt.

What is 'a minister'? What does the role involve? Is he someone extra special? Those deemed to be Church of God ministers come in fifty-seven varieties, ranging from the hugely aggressive and arrogant to those whose sole purpose and motivation is to quietly serve the brethren. But even among the latter there's much misunderstanding of their role.

Ordination

The act of 'ordination' to ministry in the church varies from the simple laying-on of hands through to the awesome majesty and pomp associated with the enthronement of a Pope. It is impressive. The individual has - usually - been carefully selected following a process of screening. And from that moment they are placed on a pedestal.

Such ordination, however, falls short of the Biblical model!

Certainly, qualified individuals in the New Testament church were set apart for ministry. More accurately - for leadership, because every brother and sister in Christ is a 'minister'. Congregations had their 'overseers and deacons'. They were carefully selected (I Timothy 3) and were responsible to Jesus and their peers and brethren - not a Board or 'top dog' - for how they exercised their pastoral role.

Never Perfect

Many Church of God elders - perhaps most - today have learned lessons from the past. Brethren are not now subject to the same oppression many once experienced. (Unless they have chosen to place themselves under the heel of an unreformed group!) However, because of the church culture that's institutionalized in maybe ninety plus percent of today's church of God problems remain. That ingrained culture instilled a subservience to 'the ministry', and remains the backdrop to many congregations.

There's still too much unthinking acceptance of 'what the church says'. As a result the former concept of ministry is perpetuated. The ministry is viewed as 'different from us'. Given human nature it too often leads to the leader becoming power-hungry. God's way becomes corrupted.

Since the church began there have been 'bad elders'. The apostle Paul warned of them as did Jude and Peter and John - the Ephesian assemblies are an example (Acts 20). Some were intruders - 'savage wolves' - who had gained entrance and ravaged God's flock. Others arose from among the church leadership 'speaking perverse things' with the intent of gaining a personal following. And faithful brethren were on occasion driven from the assembly by arrogant self-obsessed leaders (III John 10). It's unlikely the situation will change much before Christ returns!

The Chosen

Historically a power-hungry church leadership extended the tentacles of control. The humble 'bishop' - overseer - of the assembly was exalted to high office, and a hierarchy of such offices developed over the ensuing decades. To enhance the distinction from the 'ordinary member', office-holders (the 'ordained') were designated as *clergy*.

This word (*kleros*) signifies 'chosen by lot' and refers to *all* the brethren, God's chosen (Ephesians 1:11, I Peter

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5:3). Applied to an ordained ministry it implies a separation from the flock. This centuries-old false interpretation has been absorbed into the modern church of God. Servants of the church became its lords (I Peter 5:3) - and in some churches, classed as the only true 'members'!

Another adaptation from the decaying church of the third century is the notion that the church leadership reflected the Old Testament priesthood. The clergy wrongly assumed the Levitical rights, privileges and structure rather than the pattern derived, as did the early church of God, from the synagogue.

New Testament Pattern

Church leadership in the apostolic church was simple. As the brethren met - usually in private homes - it soon became clear who was suitably gifted for leadership. He was endowed by Christ through his Spirit with those qualities needed to pastor that flock. He would be accepted by the brethren and publicly acknowledged.

It was an appointment and not an 'ecclesiastical ordination', a public recognition of his role and not a setting apart. Titus, for example, simply was to "appoint elders in every city" in Crete (Titus 1:5). The modern idea of ordination as today understood is foreign to the New Testament church.

Clearly, since the brethren met in 'house churches' (e.g. Romans 16), it was superfluous to appoint several elders to a single congregation. One man was appointed as pastor in each assembly in any one city. The 'principle of ten' likely applied, with one elder pastoring a group of ten families.

Wrote John Chrysostom (4th century) on Titus 1:5 "...everyone should have and mind his own proper cure ['parish']; for so the labor would be easier to him, and the people would have more care taken of them since their teacher would not run about to govern many churches".

The notion of a plurality of 'overseers and deacons' has reference to appointments to specific service to all the assemblies in a city, and not applicable to a single mega-church.

The 'church in Philippi', for example, was seen as one church with shared leadership, and with one elder specifically assigned to each assembly. Thus in modern terms, all the brethren in, say, New York or London or Los Angeles are 'one church' but in several congregations—not separate and often competing churches (denominational or independent) of the one God.

Role of 'Elders'

Elders, then, were not separated 'clergy' but were of the people and remained so. They were a part of the congregation they served and not parachuted in from elsewhere, not beholden to a distant 'headquarters' - other than Heaven!

They were -- should be! -- Biblically literate, humble, well-qualified. They were not career ministers with security of employment, not salaried, not pensioned. They worked in secular occupations, as did the apostle Paul though financially rewarded for their spiritual effort with the congregation. Their role was to prepare the brethren for works of service, to deter wolves, to teach sound doctrine, to encourage, to harness the spiritual gifts Jesus places in that congregation for His service and as He directs.

The church of God will benefit from a return to the Biblical pattern of leadership.

Work Together

Such change, of course, does not preclude individual congregations acting together in cooperation for specific purposes - e.g. outreach, training, publications.

The *Churches of God Outreach Ministries* is a useful model for this approach to ministry. Check out our website (www.cgom.org) for some helpful titles, and contact us at any of our addresses. We welcome all like-minded congregations to this association.

Published by:

The Churches of God Outreach Ministries
PO Box 54621
Tulsa, OK 74155-0621
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www.cgom.org

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