

Ministerial Authority

Rufus T. Burton

Abstract: Ministerial authority is the authority to preach the Word and administer the Sacraments. Such authority is only ministerial and declarative. Properly ministerial authority comes from Christ, and not the church. Ministerial authority is a servant authority bound to the declaration, exhibition and display of Christ and His benefits. Such authority is not the right to set programmatic agendas or force decisions.

Introduction

One of the hallmarks of the Reformed Tradition in the English-speaking world has been its emphasis on preaching and the preaching ministry. Contemporary debates within the Presbyterian Church (USA) have brought this traditional emphasis on preaching and preachers under pressure for a variety of reasons. At the heart of these debates is the issue of the purpose and authority of ministers of Word and Sacrament. To what are ministers of Word and Sacrament called and what kind of authority do they have when they perform their duties? It is the answer to the fundamental question of what it means to be called to the ministry of Word and Sacrament that will, in large measure, determine a view of ministerial authority.

The question of the task and authority of ministers is a vexed subject and its tensions are already present in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA). Within the *Book of Confessions*, there is a distinct difference between the continental understandings of ministry during the Reformation on the one hand, and the seventeenth century English understandings enshrined in the Westminster Standards on the other. Likewise, in the first chapter of the *Form of Government*, the “Historic Principles of Church Order” of 1789 are emphatic that “Church power” is only ministerial and declarative.¹ The problem of ministerial authority is exacerbated by a lack of consensus on what it is ministers ought to do. One English United Reformed Church pastor has lamented the fact that the ministry of the word and sacrament has, sometimes come to mean omni-competent and ubiquitous doing.² However true this assessment is, it stands in the stark contrast to the *Form of Government’s* definition of the task as study, teaching and preaching.³

Part of the problem is the fact that the renaissance of Calvin studies and the concurrent broadening of the confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church came at a time of some confusion about the place and purpose of ministry. The root question is simply put: if Christ is present to His people by the power of His Spirit through word and sacrament, what precisely is the nature of the authority given to ministers of Word and Sacrament? Because ministers are the

¹ G-10307.

² Bill Sewell, “To Equip the Saints: An Essay Prepared with the Encouragement of the URC Ministries’ Committee’s Working Party on Future Patterns of Ministry. April 2002. www.urc.org.uk/our_work/committees/ministries/equip_the_saints.html. (Accessed 31 December 2006).

³ G-6.0202b.

stewards of the mysteries⁴ of God it requires us to have some understanding of what ministry of the word and sacrament means and what such ministry entails.

The reformation notes of the church underscore the importance of understanding ministerial authority. The *Scots Confession*, following Calvin is clear that the true church is found where the word is rightly preached, where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution and there is discipline. On the face of it, ministers as those charged with preaching, administering the sacraments and moderating local Kirk Sessions are responsible for a great deal of that which makes the church the true church.

Constitutionally understood a minister's duties are primarily those associated with the proclamation of the Gospel. This makes ministry of the word and sacrament part of the prophetic office of Christ. Ministers are under-prophets called to proclaim God's will and deliver God's word to his people gathered in faithful response to the gospel. Likewise, the celebration of the sacraments is also best viewed as a part of the proclamation of the gospel as it seals in the lives of believers the good news of God's grace. As a covenant people, it falls to the stewards of God's gifts to help the people of God approach and use the means of grace for the advancement of their life in faith.

Of ministers and authority

In order to examine the authority of ordained ministers we need to have a basic understanding of both "ordained ministers" and "authority." Ministers, for our purposes, are all of those who have been ordained by the church into the office of minister of Word and Sacrament. They are the ones who have through a combination of providential guidance, prayer, discernment, and a course of study have presented themselves to the people of God as candidates for the ministry. Upon being called to labour in the Word they are ordained as ministers of Word and Sacrament.

The confessional language of the Presbyterian Church is clear that those authorized to preach, teach and administer the sacraments in the churches are ministers. Throughout the *Scots Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the *Second Helvetic Confession*, and the *Westminster Standards* the word used for those who study, teach, preach and administer the sacraments is "minister." They are alternately ministers of the Word, of the Gospel, and of the Word and Sacrament. This is to say that they are "servants" of the Word, the Gospel or the Word and Sacraments.

There has been a fairly helpful critique in the last part of the twentieth century that is critical of the term "minister" to describe solely those with the formal education and authorization of a presbytery. They point out that properly, all members have a ministry and the minister is called in part to help encourage, support and maintain the ministry of the gathered people of God. Although this is a point well made and one that ought always to be borne in mind, there is an irresolvable tension in the language of the church. The confessional heritage ties us to the language of ministers, elders, deacons and members. Likewise, the *Form of Government* uses the term "minister" as a shorthand term for minister of the Word and Sacrament.

Minister is a helpful term in addressing the nature of ministerial authority because being a minister of the Word and Sacrament is not synonymous with being the pastor of a local congregation. All pastors are ministers of the Word and Sacrament, but not all ministers of the

⁴ G-6.0202a.

Word and Sacrament are pastors. Some are called by God to be educators, chaplains, pastoral counsellors, campus ministers, missionaries, partners in mission, evangelists, even administrators, social workers, and consultants. The reason the church ordains ministers to be pastors is because being a pastor is one of the permanent biblical offices for the ordering, sustaining and preservation of the people of God. From the beginning God has used elders to rule His people. Educators, missionaries, evangelists are ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacrament because they too labour in the Word. God has tied the church to the word and the sacraments and wherever the church goes, and wherever the church sends its people, the word and the sacraments go as well.

The question of ministerial authority is a question that is addressed to all ministers whether they are pastors, counsellors, or administrators. Rather than confining the current discussion to pastors, that is to those who oversee the life of a local, gathered congregation, the words “minister” and “ministers” will be used to refer to all those who have been ordained to the ministry of the word and sacrament. Although this consideration is primarily focused on those ministers who carry out pastoral functions in local churches, it need not be limited to them.

The definition of ministerial authority is an interesting challenge because it is possible to begin with some assumptions about authority that owe more to our cultural context than to the Bible. Ministerial authority, properly understood, is the authority ministers have to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. This means that a minister’s authority is directly tied to her duties as one who preaches the word and administers the sacraments. Her authority extends to her duties, but extends no further. Ministerial authority, like all authority is delegated. A minister’s authority comes from Christ whom she proclaims and her authority is more or less obscured by her ability to make Christ and His cross plain to those who hear her. This is not to argue that preaching from a pulpit on Sunday morning is the sole source of authority, or that preaching only occurs inside the walls of a meetinghouse.⁵ But ministers are called to and thus authorized for a very specific kind of work – it is a work that relies upon their ability to address the gospel to those in their hearing.

A minister’s authority is in large part dependant upon his ability to view the world theologically and to speak the gospel to the hurting and broken world. Ministerial authority extends only this far, but such authority therefore extends into every corner of human life and endeavour. This is what is behind the Presbyterian Church’s historic assertion that church power is ministerial and declarative. Such power is best classed as authority because it is delegated by Christ. Such authority is ministerial because it serves the Lord who serves His people. Ministerial authority is only ministerial or authorized in so far as it is obedient in its service to the Word. Ministerial authority is declarative because it is expressed and most fully realized in the preaching of the gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments – in declaring the already accomplished fact of reconciliation.

Ministry and its pattern

The ministry of the church is properly patterned after the ministry of Christ. The *manus triplex* remains a solid foundation for thinking about the church’s ministry in the world. The anointed offices in the Old Testament were prophet, priest and king. The messiah – the anointed one, the

⁵ Cf Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: WJK, 2007), pp. 99-106.

coming and coming again Christ is the fulfilment of those offices. As the Head of the church, His three-fold office provides the pattern for our ministry as a community. As our Redeemer, Christ is the prophet, priest and king without parallel. As the fulfilment of the office of prophet, Jesus is the self-revelation of God and the full disclosure of the will of God for our salvation. As our great high priest Christ is the once and for all times sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world, the only person able to reconcile us to God and who sits now at the right hand of the Father making continual intercession for us. As a king, Christ subdues us to His will, rules and defends us and at the end will subdue the enemies of God.

The church joined to Christ as members of His body, participates in ministry as it is shaped by these three offices. The church is not the continuation of the incarnation; the church continues the purposes of God in creating and sustaining a faithful people on earth. In this way, the church can be said to function as a prophet, a priest and a king as it witnesses to God in Christ. As a prophet the church proclaims God's will and saving purposes for the world. As a priest the church leads the world in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving and makes intercession for the world. As a king, the church displays to the world the use of power and authority as God intends them.

The church is the priesthood of believers. As priests, Christians can and should offer the forgiveness of Christ to one another and their neighbour. Christians can lead, and should participate in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving whenever it is offered. Such priestly functions also tie all Christians to lives of prayer, for the world, the church and one another. The functions of the priestly office extend throughout the community. Although all Christians are priests, not all Christians are called to take on kingly or prophetic functions.

The church, as the mother of those in its care, is also a king. The church rightly has a polity to which the members are bound. Such a polity displays the gracious rule of Christ in the world. This is the provision of discipline, the third Reformation note of the church. There is discipline in the church where the church struggles against the enemy, the world and the flesh to live in accordance with God's will and way.

The church also has a prophetic role in the world. The church speaks to the world in order to make God's will known. By witnessing to the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ the church points to God's saving purposes and the life to which we have been called by our Creator. It is the community of faith that is entrusted with this witness, and the community of faith that must proclaim the gospel.

The common baptismal vocation of believers ties each member of the church to Christ's whole work. Faith sharing, truth telling, and prayer are an important part of our life together. The common baptismal vocation of Christians also ties them to an ordered ministry. From priest to king to prophet the calling to particular service in the body of Christ is narrower. Not all are called to guide the church, and not all are called upon to steward the mysteries of God. The issues are those of authority. Christ delegates authority for the purpose of service. Elders, ruling or teaching are called by God to be those who help the church preserve the integrity of their life together, and the integrity of the word they carry to the world.

The ministry of the word and sacrament is part of the prophetic office of the church. Ministers are not priests, though like other Christians they lead lives of prayer. Ministers are not kings, though with the other elders they are entrusted with the discipline of the church. The Reformation notes of the church: the true preaching of the word of God, the right administration of the sacraments and ecclesiastical discipline uprightly ministered, make the presbyters of the church the trustees and guardians of everything that makes the church the church and not a social

club. More significantly, ministers of the Word and Sacrament are thus the trustees of two-thirds of the particular identity and purpose of the church.

Ministers of Word and Sacrament hold a prophetic office in the church because they are specifically charged by Christ and the church with the duty of preaching the word of God. Consequently, the primary witness of the churches wherein the self-revelation of God in Christ is proclaimed and the teaching of the prophets and the apostles is declared occurs in the pulpits of the churches. Evangelism and Christian Education serve to enhance the ability of the church to carry the message of the pulpits into the further corners of the world and further corners of our lives.

Likewise, the sacraments are a part of the prophetic office of the church. The sacraments do not belong to priests because there is no longer a need for sacrifice. The sacraments are prophetic because they, like the word, reveal and proclaim God's saving purposes for the world and seal that benefit in our lives. They are a means of grace precisely because they communicate. God has tied the church to the sacraments and in doing so has bound us to a life in which God's word is proclaimed, sealed and exhibited publicly by those authorized to do so

As the stewards of the mysteries of God, the ministry is a gift from God to the church, in order to preserve and nourish His people and sign and seal His grace in their lives, the Lord tied the church to the means of grace – particularly to the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments. God calls Ministers of Word and Sacrament from out of the community of believers. Having been so instructed, bathed and fed, they are recognized by the church as those called by God to be stewards of the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments. The ministry is a gift because it is offered to the church in faithfulness to the covenant of grace. The primary tasks of ministry therefore are the prophetic tasks preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments.

Finally, ministers are no more priests than other believers, they are no more kings than the other elders, but they do exercise a fuller prophetic office. The authority of ministers is then rightly said to be ministerial and declarative. Their authority flows from and is bound by the Word. When ministers faithfully preach and administer the sacraments they are due the honour and authority of one who proclaims the will of God. This is not a tyrannical authority but an authority shaped by service and servanthood. Likewise, this authority does not extend into either the priestly or kingly offices. The authority of preaching is the authority to speak God's word to His people and celebrate the sacraments. The authority of preaching is patently not the authority to declare the programmatic agenda of the church.

Ministry and its purpose

It is telling that Calvin in his *Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of Word and the Sacraments* begins not with the church but with the gospel ministry itself. For Calvin, the purpose of the ministry is to communicate Christ to us, fallen humanity. The ministry is seen as the means of applying Christ and His benefits to believers. Calvin develops his doctrine by arguing that union with Christ, and communion with the Father are effected by the Holy Spirit. "To effect this union, the Holy Spirit uses a double instrument, the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments."⁶ Calvin continues the summary by outlining the way the

⁶ John Calvin, ET J.K.S. Reid, "Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments," *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (London: SCM, 1954), p. 172.

minister and the Holy Spirit are operative in their several different ways during the preaching of the word and the celebration of the sacraments. Calvin is clear that the minister has been tied to the means of grace and that the Holy Spirit is operative through the means of grace, but he is insistent that the Spirit is not bound to the sacraments. God honours the sacraments as a means of grace to which He has tied the church. It is the faithful reception, and not the external receiving, of the elements of the sacraments that makes them effectual to salvation. As such ministry stands at the very centre of covenant life.

There is a tension in the confessional witness of the Presbyterian Church, with regard to the question of whether or not a minister's preaching can be called "the Word of God." There is no tension, thanks in large part to Augustine, about the role of ministers in the administration of the sacraments. On one end of the tension, Heinrich Bullinger declares the preaching of the Word to be the Word of God,

THE PREACHING OF THE WORD OF GOD IS THE WORD OF GOD. Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is proclaimed, and received by the faithful; and that neither any other Word of God is to be invented nor is to be expected from heaven: and that now the Word itself which is preached is to be regarded, not the minister that preaches; for even if he be evil and a sinner, nevertheless the Word of God remains still true and good.⁷

Bullinger's position has the advantage of declaring the place and importance of Reformed ministry during the heat of the sixteenth century. The live question is whether such a view is compatible or irreconcilable with the *Westminster Standards*.

Throughout the *Confession of Faith*, the Westminster divines never clearly positively state the duties of ministers. There is, for instance, no chapter of the *Confession* dedicated to the ministry. When the ministry is discussed it is defined in the midst of discussions on separate, but related issues, especially, over and against the civil magistrate. Happily, the *Westminster Standards* do treat the ministry enough for us to interpret a general view.

In XXIII.3 [6.129] the duties of ministry are named as "the administration of the word and Sacraments, or the power of the Keyes of the Kingdome of Heaven..." In the context of the chapter, these ecclesiastical duties are reserved for ministers and expressly removed from the authority of the civil magistrate. What the divines were marking was the line where the work of clerks was to be distinguished from work of clerks in Holy Orders. Perhaps the clearest definition of the work of ministers is found in XXI.5 [6.116]. "The reading of the scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the word, in obedience unto God with understanding, faith and reverence...the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ..." The *Confession of Faith* defines both parts of the work involved in worship. True to the Calvinistic heritage, the word has to be both preached and heard, the sacraments have to be administered and received. Part of the problem for the Westminster divines was their historical situation. Given the persecutions of Laud and the Carolingian church they were not likely to agree to the proposition that any man who had been lawfully ordained by the establishment proclaims God's word whenever he preached. They were also clear about the fact part of our glorification and enjoyment of God was both private and public worship. The presence of a minister was no guarantee of proper religious worship either

⁷ 5.004.

on Sunday morning or during the weekday. What they preserve, however, is the insistence that preaching has to be sound and the sacraments need to be duly administered both by one ordained by the church to do the work. It is clear that the Reformation “notes” are very much present in the *Confession of Faith*.

The *Larger Catechism* offers what is perhaps, the clearest discussion of this topic in the *Westminster Standards*. There the office of minister is discussed under the heading of the means of grace.

Q. 158. By whom is the Word of God to be preached?

A. The Word of God is to be preached only by such as are sufficiently gifted, and also duly approved and called to that office.

Q. 159. How is the Word of God to be preached by those that are called thereunto?

A. They that are called to labour in the ministry of the Word are to preach sound doctrine, diligently, in season, and out of season; plainly, not in the enticing word of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit, and of power; faithfully, making known the whole counsel of God; wisely, applying themselves to the necessities and capacities of the hearers; zealously, with fervent love to God, and the souls of his people; sincerely, aiming at his glory, and their conversion, edification, and salvation.

Although the question of authorized preaching is explicitly raised by the catechism, the issue of authorized administration of the sacraments is not. Albeit, a minister is assumed in Q. 161 [7.271], but following Augustine the piety of the minister is not what renders the sacrament effectual to salvation. The *Larger Catechism* simply assumes the particular calling, training and approval for the holding of an office in the church. Further it defines ministry in terms not often highlighted in our own context. What it shares with the *Second Helvetic Confession* is the central place of the proclaimed Word in the life of the community.

Two things are clear. First, the Westminster divines are at pains to ensure that no sinful human being is invested with the kind of power that was directed against them before the start of the English Civil-War. Second the *Westminster Standards* share with the other Reformed confessions a clear understanding of the importance of the preached word for the church. Preaching is important because it is the word of God, preaching is one of the notes by which the true church is discerned and preaching is the means by which a fallen humanity is converted, edified and saved.

Having looked briefly, at Calvin, the *Second Helvetic Confession* and the *Westminster Standards*, there is a clear consensus that a minister’s authority extends to the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and, to a lesser extent, a role in the preservation of discipline. This authority is delegated by Christ, and is given expressly for the purpose of building up the church. An important thing to notice is that a minister’s authority is not to be confused with the power to get a church court to approve one of several programmatic initiatives. The preaching of the word certainly has influence on the programmatic discipleship of a church but it does not have power over it.⁸

Among modern commentators on the purpose and role of pastors, Jackson Carroll, provides a helpful insight in his book *God’s Potters*. Carroll argues that pastoral ministry is best

⁸ Cf P. T. Forsyth, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Independent, 1953), p. 131. “There is no small uncertainty in the ministry about the range of its proper work...ministers are tempted to exchange slow deep influence on the world for swift power over it.”

characterized as a balance between understandings of pastoral leadership as an office, a profession and a calling. Carroll offers these different models as ways of understanding pastoral leadership and as a means to provide some analysis on the different perspectives of pastoral leadership. The reason Carroll relies on a tension of all three models to best describe pastoral ministry is because he believes that the role of pastor involves each of the three.⁹ His model also provides the opportunity to view ministerial authority from within each of the models and then provide some insight into the authority of ministers who manage to achieve a balance in the ministry as an office, a profession and a calling.

Ministers are ordained to an office in the church. An office is a “formal position in the church with specified ‘official’ duties and recognized by ordination, either by a congregation or a denomination.”¹⁰ Ministers are ordained by church in order to take up specific duties. Their office is to preach the word, administer the sacraments and help in the preservation and nurture of discipline. This is more than liturgical presidency. Part of the baptismal vocation shared by all Christians is that of priestly intercession for each other, one’s neighbours and the world. Ordination to be a minister of Word and Sacrament is ordination to the prophetic office and therefore to the proclamation, exhibition and display of Christ and the benefits of the new covenant.

Ministry is an office because God has tied the church to specific habits and virtues: the means of grace. While prayer and Bible reading are means of grace encouraged for all Christians, ministers are called to steward the public proclamation of the word and the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. Ministers are given very specific duties. The office is one that involves a great deal of preparation for services of worship, the primary and foundational context in which ministers proclaim and exhibit the gospel.

The authority to assume and perform the duties of the office comes from ordination to the task by the church. The minister is the minister because the presbytery put her there. Likewise the presbytery put the minister there to perform a very specific set of duties: study, teach and preach. While there are also a host of pastoral duties that range from visitation with the sick and dying to the moderation of Kirk Sessions, these secondary pastoral duties grow out of and are grounded by the primary duties of the office, namely preaching and the administration of the sacraments.

In such a view, ministerial authority is limited to the authority to preach the word and administer the sacraments.¹¹ The authority of ministers is prophetic and therefore ministerial and declarative. The power to determine the programmatic life of the congregation does not flow from the office. The minister’s authority, in so far as ministry is an office, is to perform the prophetic tasks. The supervision of the discipleship of a congregation is expressly shared with other elders. Because it is shared, ministers share equally the authority of the presbyters in a local congregation.

The pastoral ministry is also a profession. Carroll points out that this model of pastoral ministry has been highly contentious in recent years. Ministry as a profession implies “an educated or learned clergy, competent largely by virtue of that education to engage in the core

⁹ Carroll is explicit that his sociological study is of pastors, that is ministers primarily involved with local congregations. For the purpose of this section of the paper, pastor and minister are probably interchangeable.

¹⁰ Jackson Carroll, *God’s Potters: Pastoral Leadership in the Shaping of Congregations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 16-17.

¹¹ In some ways this is reflected by the fact that ministers have only three absolute freedoms in their pastoral duties: the text of Scripture, the text of the sermon and the hymns sung. These are preserved for ministers because their authority extends this far.

tasks of the pastoral office.”¹² As a profession, it is the masters of divinity degree that gives ministers the authority to take certain roles in the church. Like other professionals, ministers are stewards of the “knowledge and practice” of ministry. In such a view seminaries and divinity schools function to advance, serve and disseminate the knowledge and practice of ministry. For ministers, it is the seminary’s degree and the minister’s successful completion of the course which combine confer ministerial authority.

Carroll highlights the importance of this model for the nineteenth century and the cultural and societal changes that came about as a result of growing industrialization and urbanization. He also examines, briefly, the informal pastoral formation common to the apostolic age as well as the roots of more formal ministerial education in the Reformation. Presbyterians have long been known for the extensive and rigid educational requirements of their ministerial candidates. This reflects both a theological commitment to insure that those charged with the prophetic task have a firm grasp on their faith, and also an understanding of ministry as one of the three professions. Because the ministry is a learned profession, learning is required in order to provide the foundation for a life spent preaching and administering the sacraments.

The professional model is the one from which it is most difficult to make conclusions about ministerial authority. A seminary education does prepare one for preaching and in a more limited sense for the administration of the sacraments but seminary curricula are (rightly) not limited to the prophetic tasks. Ministers do need to have a firm grasp on the Bible, their several theological traditions and their people in order to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments with pastoral integrity. Seminaries prepare ministers well for the hours of study that are required. A degree is not, however, the conferment of authority. Ministers are able so speak about a wide range of things with weight because they have studied several topics. For example, ministers may know more than the other elders about the stages of grief. This knowledge does not, however, make the minister a counsellor nor does it mitigate the elders’ responsibility to be with those under their care in grief.

The ministry is a profession, in that ministers are educated and formed into the tasks they will perform in the church. Pastoral authority, however, is not a function of earning degrees. To be sure, the office of pastor requires education and formation. But, education and formation are not authority. It is the church and not the divinity school that recognizes the call of God. The dependence upon degrees for authority only grants the authority of the scribes – a partial authority, insufficiently robust for Christian ministry.

Finally, Carroll highlights the fact that the ministry is a calling. Both learning and piety are required of ministers. “Ordination recognizes that God has called the ordinand to this office.”¹³ Properly, this calling is the foundation of ministerial authority. God has called the minister to service in the church – to the prophetic office. Ordination is then the church’s recognition of the call of God on the life of a particular believer to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Classically, in the Reformed tradition, there are three parts to this call, an inner-call, the confirmation of the church, and the call of a particular church. There is no particular need for these three to flow in a prescribed order, but all three must be present in sufficient measure for the church to ordain a candidate.

An important qualification is that the ordination of ministers means ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Ordination is tied to the office for which the candidate was educated and formed. This means that the authority given at ordination is the authority to preach

¹² Carroll, *God’s Potters*, p. 20.

¹³ Carroll, *God’s Potters*, p. 22.

and administer the sacraments. As a calling ministry is something to which God calls believers. There is something important about the fact that it is the baptized who are called to minister to the baptized. The calling is not to become the potentate of a parish, much less a pontiff. The calling is to proclaim and exhibit Christ and the benefits of the new covenant.

In conclusion, ministry is a calling to an office for which one is prepared. Part of this preparation should be an exposure to the proper boundaries of ministerial authority. The authority of ministers is limited by the nature of the call itself. There was once a time when ministers were, perhaps the only ones in the community with even a rudimentary understanding of nursing, law, science, and even accountancy. As a part of their life with others they helped where they could. Properly understood, however, ministerial authority limits the role of ministers as ministers but not as neighbours. Such a boundary and such authority ought help to remove the idols of omni-competence and over-professionalization.¹⁴

When all is said, ministers are charged with the duty and have the authority to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. This is to labour in the word and doctrine. It is the duty and privilege to help people think theologically about their lives. For ministers then, the Bible on the pulpit, the table and the font are the foundation and the extent of their authority. As such it is both tightly bound and limitless. Each of these three *loci* deserves to be taken in turn. The Bible, as the Word of God, and therefore the rule for faith and life, is the only infallible witness to Jesus Christ and therefore the gospel. Ministers have primarily the task of interpreting scripture, and thus proclaiming the gospel. Ministers, by virtue of their calling and their office, have to inhabit three different worlds to proclaim the gospel effectively. It is the skills needed to explore these three worlds that form the foundation of a minister's professional formation. Ministers need to understand the world *behind* the text. This is to say that it is important for minister to know who the Babylonians were, who Tiglath-Pileser was and why they are each important figures in the Bible. Ministers need to have a grasp of the geo-political reality that surrounded the founding of the nation and then surrounding the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Likewise an understanding of the Roman Empire is also important. It makes no sense, to take one example, for Paul to want go to Rome and appeal the ruling of a minor politician, unless you have an awareness of the rights of Roman citizens. There is also the world *of* the text. This is the world of canon, of the stories of scripture and their relationship to one another. For this reason, an understanding of Greek and Hebrew are essential as well as the genres of scripture and their customary expressions in the text itself. Finally, there is *our* world. It is to this world that the Word and Spirit speak to us through the text. God speaks not only to the past, but God speaks to us. In order to exercise their authority properly ministers have to have a professional grasp on the Bible and their theological traditions. This is because their calling and office is expressly to the prophetic functions of the church and therefore to the proclamation of the gospel.

The Table from which the community is feed and around which the community gathers in obedience to the Word is the place from which the bread of heaven is distributed to believers. Likewise, the font is the place from which the community emerges and in the end signifies the death and resurrection we share with Christ. The table and the font each proclaim, exhibit and display the gracious intention of God for the world. From the word to the font to the table the minister helps the community to hear, to taste and see that the Lord is God. Despite the seeming

¹⁴ Typical of my usual debates with my URC colleagues, contra Sewell in *To Equip the Saints*, I believe that firmer rather than looser structures are of most use in dispatching these particular idols.

limitedness of this authority, it is both all the authority ministers' need, and more than any human can handle without fear and trembling.

Ministry and the church

Perhaps, part of the driving force behind the Presbyterian Church's current level of interest in ecclesiology is the question of the church's purpose and identity. An answer to the question of the church's purpose would help to identify the purpose of the ministry in helping to lead the church towards the ends to which it is called. The assumption behind this is that the ministry is best understood as a part of the institutional church. Further it assumes that once our ecclesiology is clear, our theology of ordination will flow from the conclusions that have been made.

The assumption that the ministry is best viewed as a part of the institutional church does offer some compelling points. First it allows the church to be the primary lens through which ministry is viewed and so ministers are seen as agents of the transforming work of God in and through the church. It also means that the institutional church itself has authority over the training and placement of the ministers on its rolls. Third, viewed this way the ministry is tied quite directly to the church, its structures, institutional goals and priorities. Forth it allows for theology to flow from the church to the ministry. The problem is that so viewed, the ministry becomes simply the vehicle for the expression of corporate will.

The ministry is better understood as being a part of the gospel and not of the church. The Word and Spirit created the church through the teaching, preaching and prayers of the apostles. God called a people out of the world through the voice, power and effort of those who proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ. Ministry is tied primarily to the gospel and not to institutional expressions of corporate life. We see this clearly enough in our own denomination. The reunifications of 1955 and 1983 did not lead to the mass re-ordination of the ministerial corps.

The gospel ministry is God's gift to the church. The ministry is not the church's gift to itself or to the world.¹⁵ That men and women are called out of the community to serve the community should not surprise us. All ministers are baptized believers. They have been under the sacramental discipline of the church, and having grown in the nurture and admonition of the Lord they are then called to be stewards of that Word and those Sacraments.

Because ministers are tied to the word and sacraments and not to institutions the ministry is best viewed through the lens of the gospel and not the church. Firstly, this means that the word never travels without the Sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are tied inextricable to the preaching of the Gospel. Secondly, it acknowledges the fact that ministry happens prior to the faith community. "Organizing Pastor" is an appropriate name. God's Spirit precedes the "calling pastor" of a church but the church does not. The minister is sent to call the people out of the world and into the church. Thirdly, it frees the ministry from the administrative programmes of a corporate expression of the church. The ministry is not primarily about the local expression of a denominational identity. The gospel ministry is first and foremost about the transformation of lives through the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Ministry does belong in discussions of ecclesiology, not because the ministry grows out of the church but because the church grows out of the preaching of the word and the celebration

¹⁵ URC Church Related Social Workers are interesting in this context.

of the sacraments. The church continues through the exercise of discipline. The church is the creature of the Word. That word is present to the world and the community primarily through the gospel ministry. The church can never be said to have proprietary control of the ministry. As those with delegated authority, the church does not so much control the ministry as steward the stewards. It is up to the church to recognize the gospel in the preaching of those who present themselves to become ministers of Word and Sacrament. As an example of such stewardship, the theological foundation for ministerial training and formation grows out of the church's need to discern the gospel, not out of the church's perceived need for self-perpetuation. Ministers are trained because ministers are given the huge responsibility of proclaiming the word of God and administering the Sacraments and leading the community in the means of grace. This requires study and training. If a minister is apt to teach, the minister needs to know the content of the faith and how that faith speaks to a wide range of issues (1 Timothy 3:2).

Importantly, because the church grew up around the ministry of the word and sacrament the church can never be said to seat of a minister's authority. Christ is the one to whom all authority has been given and so a minister's authority finally comes from Christ and not from the church. What the church does do, however, is to recognize the good news of Christ is the life and witness of its ministers. Authority is ministerial and declarative when it proclaims the will of God for the world. This also means that a minister's authority is bound by the preaching of the reconciling word and the means of grace.

Such a position also means that both the ministry and the church are means to an end. They are means to God's end and not our own. The point of the church is not the perpetuation of the ministry, nor is ministry primarily about the perpetuation of the church. God's re-creative grace and reconciliation prevent us from thinking that the perpetuation of anything human is the end of the church or the ministry. It is God's Word that stands forever. The church and the ministry are witnesses to the Word made flesh.

The ministry of the word and sacrament is a gift to the church and as a gift it is incumbent upon the church to cherish and nurture the gift. As a consequence, the ministry though distinguishable from the church can never be separated from it. There is no church without the preaching of the word and there really isn't preaching if it doesn't seek to build up the body of Christ. Fixing or understanding the purpose and identity of the church will not fix the ministry. Both the church and the ministry must understand their identity in terms of the gift of Christ, His word and the means of grace. As stewards of those mysteries, ministers are part of what helps the church be the church. The church as the community of the redeemed bears witness to the world of God's intention for the creation. As the community in which the word, the sacraments and discipline are nurtured, the church is the community created, formed and sustained by the preaching of the word and the celebration of sacraments.

Conclusion

Ministerial authority is the delegated authority of Christ to perform the prophetic functions of the church. It is the authority to preach the word and administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As such a minister's authority is founded not upon an ecclesiastical body, but is founded upon the gospel she preaches from the pulpit, table and font. The church's role in authorizing such a ministry is in discerning and recognizing the gospel in the minister's preaching.

Functionally, this means that ministerial authority is bound to and bounded by the pulpit. This limits a minister's authority to that which is ministerial and declarative. Ministerial in so far as it serves the purpose of Christ, declarative in so far as it witnesses to the accomplished facts of redemption history. A minister is able to help people think theologically precisely because the minister is engaged in the exhibition and display of the new covenant in the life of the local church and its community.

Practically this means that the minister's authority is truly found only at the font, the table and the pulpit. The authority ministers' share with the other presbyters in the church courts is the shared authority of the kingly function of the church. Ministerial authority does not extend to the power to dictate the terms of the life of a local church.

Because ministerial authority is declarative it is also imperative. The accomplished facts of redemption history do require a response. Ministers do not, however, have the authority to demand or force a response. Such work is the gracious ministry of the Spirit of God. Rather, ministers have the authority, as delegated servants of Christ, to declare the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Which, though foolishness to the world, is for us the power and wisdom of God.