



The Shape of Pastoral Ministry

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Introduction

Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda is one of the few bits of church Latin known among Presbyterians, even though we are not sure how to translate it. We often make the mistake of rendering the motto, “the church reformed always reforming,” as if the church were its own change agent. Actually, *reformanda* is passive rather than active, thus: “The church reformed always to be reformed.” Our motto expresses confidence that *God* is the author of the church’s reform, not we ourselves.

Nevertheless, the church is not called to lethargy, simply waiting for God to act. John Calvin was convinced that reform of the church is always based on the three pillars of “doctrine . . . administering the sacraments . . . and governing the church.” He was also clear that ministry – the pastoral office – is essential to the revival of the church’s faithful theology, worship, and order. Along with other great 16th century reformers, Calvin held the ministry in highest regard because he was convinced that the church’s fidelity to the gospel depends on proclamation of the Word in preaching and sacraments, worship that glorifies God, and church order that honors the Spirit’s leading.

Contemporary ministers, like their predecessors, are beset by a bewildering range of congregational and denominational expectations. The list of demands on pastors’ time is endless. The difficulty goes deeper, however. Beneath every demand on time and energy lies the reality that the vocational core of pastoral ministry is no longer discernible. The church does not have a cohesive understanding of ministry that can be shared by pastors in congregational settings (much less by other ministers in various forms of service). Ministers are presented with a bewildering and unstable bundle of images depicting the essence of ministry: preacher . . . teacher . . . community builder . . . programmer . . . marketer . . . therapist . . . change agent . . . care giver . . . manager . . . entrepreneur . . . the list goes on! These images are more than another collection of tasks; they are comprehensive models of ministry that

offer competing options without a compelling rationale for choice.

The Office of Theology and Worship devotes significant resources to encouraging the church's pastors and enhancing ministers' capacity to discover and strengthen a shared vocational core. "The Company of Pastors," the "Pastor Theologian Program," and the transition into ministry initiative, "Excellence From the Start," are all designed to be of service to servants within the church. *The Shape of Pastoral Ministry*, Theology and Worship Occasional Paper No. 13, is offered as a contribution to pastors' ongoing conversation about the contours of their ministry.

The Shape of Pastoral Ministry reprints two significant essays that are no longer readily available. "The Maceration of the Minister" by the late Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler, is an incisive, sympathetic analysis of the plight of ministers. Although the essay is a couple of decades old, its viewpoint is even more focused today. The essay appeared in *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* published by Fortress Press. It is reprinted here with the publisher's permission. "The Teaching Authority of the Minister in the Reformed Tradition: A Contemporary Proposal" by Richard R. Osmer, the Thomas W. Synnott Professor of Christian Education at Princeton Theological Seminary, presents a creative understanding of the office we Presbyterians used to call "teaching elder." The essay first appeared in *Affirmation*, a journal of Union Theological Seminary and is reprinted with the seminary's permission.

The Office of Theology and Worship believes that *The Shape of Pastoral Ministry* is a useful resource for pastors, sessions, and presbyteries. We hope that it will be used by groups of ministers and elders as a means to order discussion of the perils and possibilities of ministry .

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The Shape of Pastoral Ministry

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Maceration of the Minister

Joseph A. Sittler

The church says that it wants better preaching — and really means it. But there is in this demand some bitter irony for the preacher. To preach well requires time, reflection, solitude; and the church makes other demands of the preacher that annihilate these three requirements. The situation I propose to describe is already and painfully well-known to the clergy, and if an address to them has only an intermural value, they are perhaps comforted in their pain by the knowledge that others know of it. It is nevertheless said here on the purely tactical ground that someone ought to speak out against what I call the maceration of the minister. Someone ought to do so with plain, reportorial force — not as a psychologist, internist, or time-study expert, but as a churchperson within the context of a convocation traditionally concerned with the practical well-being of the churches.

I sought for a less violent term to designate what I behold, but maceration was the only one sufficiently accurate. Among the meanings of the term listed in the dictionary is this grim one: *to chop up into small pieces*. That this is happening to thousands of ministers does not have to be argued or established; it needs only to be aggressively stated. The minister's time, focused sense of vocation, vision of his or her central task, mental life, and contemplative acreage — these are all under the chopper. Observation leads me to conclude, too, that this fact is general. The person who looks back thirty years to ordination is in no better circumstance than the one who looks back three years. The one who is minister in an established parish and surrounded with a staff has substantially the same complaint as the mission minister with a self-propelled mimeograph. Nor does the church body in which the person is a minister, or the distinction or obscurity of the school which awarded a degree in divinity, make any perceivable difference.

What the schools elevate the actual practice of the ministry flattens. The schools urge to competence in the various fields of theological study. The canons of competence that determine the churches' practice are not only strange to what the schools supply and encourage, they are radically destructive of their precedence and nurture. There is something positively sardonic in a quick jump from a remembered student in a remembered classroom to the pastor in the parish. I have done many such jumps and the effect is disheartening. In the classroom the student was told that the *basileia tou theou*, for instance, is a phrase of enormous scope and depth, and that the declaration of it should be informed by such studies as were taught in class. It was further urged that such study ought to persist throughout life. The teachers were concerned that the student not become so insensible as to make such easy identifications with the Kingdom of God as characterize the promotional theological literature of our burgeoning churches.

Visit the former student some years later in what he or she calls inexactly the "study," and one is more than likely to find the pastor accompanied by volumes taken from the student room. Filed on top of these will be mementos of present concerns: a roll of blueprints, a file of negotiations between the parish, the bank, and the Board of Missions; samples of asphalt tile; and a plumber's estimate.

When one wonders what holds this pastor together, what allows equal enthusiasm for practical decisions and pastoral and proclamatory function, one learns that if he or she is held together at all, it is by the public role of responsibility for the external advancement of the congregation. The terms in which this advancement are commonly assessed seep backward and downward to transform the pastor's interior relation to his or her studies. Those studies become less and less an occupation engaged in for the clarification of the role as witness to the gospel and pastor to the people, and become more and more frantic efforts to find biblical or theological generalities that will religiously dignify the minister's promotional purposes. The will of God has got to be

simplified into a push for the parish house. The Holy Spirit is reduced to a holy resource that can be used as a punch line for the enforcement of parish purposes. The theme of Christian obedience must be stripped of its judging ambiguities and forthwith used as a lever to secure commitment that is somehow necessarily correlated with observable services to the current and clamant program. The message, in short, is managed in terms of its instrumental usefulness for immediate goals. “Arise, and let us go hence” becomes a text so epigrammatically apt that it were a shame to lose it by the complication of context or exegesis.

Where are the originating places of this process, and what forms does it take? There are, I think, three that are so obvious and constant that they can be named and described. But even these are to be recognized as functions of a force that is pervasive and underlies them all. This basic force is a loss of the sense of the particularity of the church, the consequent transformation of the role of the minister into that of a “religious leader,” and the still-consequent shift whereby the ministry is regarded as a “profession,” and theological education has come to understand its task as “professional education.” Had this shift in meanings not occurred, the three specific forces I am about to name could hardly have been effective. But the shift has occurred — and the minister is macerated by pressures emanating from the parish, the general church bodies, and the “self-image of the minister.”

The Parish: The very vocabulary that has become common is eloquent. The parish has a “plant,” its nature or purpose is specified in terms of a “program” for which a “staff” is responsible to a “board.” The “program” is evaluated in terms of palpable production which can be totaled with the same hard-boiled facticity as characterizes a merchandising operation — and commonly is. The minister, like it or not, is the executive officer. I know of a synod of a church body which, wishing to put the matter of financial support of the “program” of the church on a less obviously allocated basis than characterizes the property tax office of the municipality, came up with a “fresh” idea: each member

should give as the Lord had prospered that person. The synod called it the “*grace system*”!

This systematization of the holy betrays, if nothing worse, a peculiar atrophy of a Protestant sense of humor. Our theology of stewardship is pragmatically translated into terms and operational devices which deny the theology we affirm. The path to such practices is easily discernible. After a generation or two during which paid quartets, in the better-heeled parishes, weekly praised God as surrogates for the congregation, and professional organizations raised the money for “plant expansion” (all, of course, with a well-oiled unction that would have glazed the eyeballs of St. Paul), it is not surprising that the counsel to stewardship should be preceded, according to some church programs, by an inquisitorial scrutiny of the share of each of the sheep in the gross national product. The reply, of course, is that it works. There can be no doubt that it does. The same reply, however, if made normative for the truth of the entire nature and scope of the meaning of the church, would indicate that the theology of prayer ought to take account of the reported correlation between petition and the growth rate of potted plants.

The Christian community always walks close to the edge of superstition, magic, and the strange human desire to translate grace into a workable lubricant for the parish. There is a relation between an immeasurable gift of grace and the responding gifts of humanity to advance the institutional celebration of the gospel of grace. But it is the task of theology, as it ought to be a concern of planned parish preaching and instruction, to witness to this grace in such a way as to raise Christian eyebrows over every perverting proposal to mechanize it.

There is no evidence that policy deters perversion. A church in a surplice is as easily seduced as a church in a black robe, or one with neither of these. That the “business of America is business” has bequeathed to us all a vocabulary, a point of view, canons of

evaluation that are so deeply rooted in our parishes that perhaps nothing short of a Kierkegaardian attack upon Christendom will suffice for renovation.

The General Church Bodies: What characterizes the mind of the parish is but amplified, solidified, and given enhanced authority in the larger world of the general bodies. Some years ago it became apparent to certain large corporations that they had succeeded so well in fashioning the company men into symmetrical functionaries that a danger was recognized. A few eccentrics were deliberately sought out, protected and asked to give themselves to reflection uninhibited by charts.

Such sardonic maturity has not yet arisen within the churches. The fantastic rigidity, the almost awesome addiction to “channels,” the specialization of concern and operation that characterize our structure have made us, in large part, prisoners of accredited mediocrity. “The wind bloweth where it listeth,” but when it does, a shudder of embarrassment racks the structure from top to bottom. If another J. S. Bach should appear in my church and succeed, as the first one did, in giving a new deep piety a new and adequate voice, he would have to plead his case before elected or appointed arbiters whose authority exceeds that of the consistory of Köthen or Leipzig — and whose general cultivation is less.

The informing and edifying of the church through charismatic endowments by the Holy Spirit is not incompatible with the doctrine of the one holy catholic and apostolic church. But it is incompatible with the church order that takes its model from the more banal children of this world. We affirm the charismatic in piety and imprison it in established structures in practice. It has actually come to pass that our churches maintain a disciplined cadre of inspirational operators. These persons are on call for whatever program the church from time to time decides to accent. They can blow any horn one hands them. If the program involves support for educational institutions, they stand ready to declare

across the broad reaches of the land in districts, conferences, and parishes that “the future of the church hangs upon the success of the venture in education.” And when at the next general convention the scene shifts to rural missions, the same enthusiasm, now supplied with a changed terminology and directed toward a changed goal, is sent out on the road from general headquarters. One has heard this interchangeable vivacity vocalize so many and such various projects as to be reminded that the salesman is a category that can be defined quite independently of the product sold. Whether his sample case contains hammer handles or lingerie is nothing to the point.

The Self-image of the Minister: The transformation of the minister’s self-image is the third force contributing to the maceration. The effects of this transformation at the deepest levels of the individual’s personal life can hardly be spoken of in terms that are too grave. For this image is, strictly, not a professional or merely personal or even church-official image. It is rather an image given with the office of the ministry in and by a church in obedience to the command of the Lord of the gospel. The “ministry of the Word and Sacraments” belongs to no person; all believers belong to it. And among these some are acknowledged as having been given a charism, undergone preparation, and announced their intention to serve the gospel in this particular ministry. In the full gravity of this gift, task, and intention, a person is ordained to this ministry, charged in specific terms drawn from the dominical imperative faithfully to fulfill it. The self-image of the minister is then more than a self-image; it is an image of the vocation and task of the self gathered up into a gift and a task that was before the self came to be, having a reality that transcends while it involves the whole self, and which will be bestowed upon the church by the Lord when this particular self is no longer of the church in history.

Fragmentation has become a common term in psychology and sociology. But what has happened to the ministry is all that term suggests and reports, but more painful and accusatory because of the gravity of that public bestowing and receiving of the Lord’s

ministry of Word and Sacrament. A vase can be fragmented; maceration is what a human being feels when fragmented. It is difficult for the minister to maintain a clear vision of the self when so seldom doing what he or she ought. The self-image of a servant of the gospel has been slowly clarified, carefully matured, informed, and sensitized during years of preparation. At the time of ordination, the church publicly and thankfully acknowledged a gift, a discipline, and a person's intention to assume a task.

All of this is under constant attrition in the present form of the churches. And thus it comes about that honesty in the fulfillment of the minister's central task is gradually laid aside in favor of sincerity. *Sincerity* is a term a person uses to enable the self to live with itself in the face of uneasy questions about honesty. There remain, however, deep down but insistent, voices and remembrances that tell the person what is going on and that the exchange is not a good one. And the enthusiastic readiness of parish and church to accept, even to applaud, the shift makes the suffering of the minister the more acute.

There have been a number of studies, some widely publicized, in which attention has been called to the large number of crack-ups of various degrees of severity among the clergy. The supporting testimony is impressive. The reasons most often suggested are too much work, too long a day, too various a complex of problems and duties, too unremitting a drain on emotional and mental stores, insufficient opportunity to lift the clerical nose from the parish grindstone.

While these facts are present and powerful, the sum of them does not, I think, get to the heart of the matter. They are too obvious, too shallow; they do not designate what comes out — stumbling, embarrassed, and often gestured rather than stated — when one observes and listens with attention. From many hours spent with many former students I have learned that there is a constant fact in the variety of their confessions, overt or oblique.

These persons are deeply disturbed because they have a sense of vocational guilt. This guilt is so strong, so clear, and so deeply sunk in their central self-consciousness that one knows with an immediate impatience that no diminution of hours or other rearrangements of outer life can have decisive effect.

This sense of guilt has an observable content. A minister has been ordained to an Office, but too often ends up running an office. Solemnly ordained to the ministry in Christ's church, most of the pastors I know really want to be what they intended and prepared for. Instead they have ended up in a kind of dizzy occupational oscillation. They are aware of the truth of what Karl Barth said in one of his earliest addresses: "Our people expect us to take them more seriously than they take themselves and they will not thank us if we do not do so." Most ministers are aware that it is a tough and delicate labor to insert the lively power of the Word of God into the rushing occupations and silent monologues of human beings. Most recall with a sense of joy the occasions when honest work and unhurried reflection gave a strange victory to their efforts. But these occasions are infrequent, set amid great stretches of guilt-begetting busyness.

What, then, is to be done? From each of the designated constituents of the problem a different response is required. There are the professors in schools of theology, the parishes, the officials in the general bodies, the ministers themselves. Upon professors in the schools of theology there rests an immediate and pressing responsibility. Our clear perception of the demolition wrought upon our labors with students, combined with the respect accorded us by our churches, urges us away from silence and toward articulate protest. We ought to be more courageous, critical, and noisy advocates for our students, more concerned protectors of their reflective future. Our intermural grousing has now the obligation to leap over the wall and seek to make itself heard among parishes and in the offices of church officialdom. For it is there that the machinery of maceration and the pounding of program are set in motion.

It is, I think, not true that the parish demands of its minister to become simply an executive officer of multiple activities. The congregation is likely to accept, support, and be deepeningly molded by the understanding of Office and calling which is projected by its minister's actual behavior. It will come to assess as central what the pastor, in the actual performance of ministry and use of time, makes central. And when this tightening and clarification of the minister's conception of the Office discloses, in the reflective depth and ordering skill of the sermon, where his or her heart and mind are centered, the parish will honor this pastoral obedience to "take them more seriously than they take themselves."

The officialdom of the church, and how it may be penetrated by a knowledge of the plight of the minister, present a more difficult — because more subtle — problem. When one beholds the staff-generated devices dreamed up by boards and commissions to focus the attention of the church-in-convention assembled upon their particular programs, one wonders if the motivation is exclusively either educational or evangelical. Have these members of promotional staffs not fallen under the sovereignty of Parkinson's Law, whereby whatever *is* tends to persist, whatever *does* is driven by dynamics strange to its purpose to do more and wider and bigger? Must not each "program" outshout the other in order to dramatize an urgency psychologically necessary for its own sense of importance, if not priority?

One does not have to operate at the top level of the ecumenical movement to suspect that the "nontheological factors" there exposed as powerful in church and theological history are operative along the whole front. It is no ingratitude toward my own family in Christendom that I take delight in the fact that there are about one hundred million of us! And the dynamics of this delight will not bear too much scrutiny in terms of the truth of the gospel, the obedience to Christ, and other such properly elevated rubrics.

We may and perhaps ought to be impatient about the world's quip that when a person becomes a bishop, that person will never thereafter eat a bad meal, read a good book, or hear the truth. But from within the family we dare a smile. For in the very generality that determines executive office, there is a power that disengages from the common table of parish existence, from the direct and pathetic book of the common life, and from the moments of sudden truth that stun and depress and exalt the minister on his or her ordinary rounds.

Finally there is the person of the minister; and in what follows I appeal to him or her from the same center as has informed this essay on preaching. The pastor, in private and imperiled existence, must fight for wholeness and depth and against erosion. By a sheer violent effort of will he or she must seek to *become* the calling, submit life and self to be shaped from the center outward. The minister need not be slapped into uncorrelated fragments of function; need not become a weary and unstructured functionary of a vague, busy moralism; need not see the visions and energies and focused loyalty of his or her calling run, shallowly like spilled water, down a multitude of slopes.

Certain practical, immediate, and quite possible steps can be taken. The temptation to improvised, catch-as-catch-can preaching, for instance, can be beaten back by calculated ordering of one's study. The most profitable period in my own parish preaching came about because I did that. What I learned in seminary about Paul of Tarsus, Paul's Christology and ethics, was not sufficient either for the great subject or for the discharge of my preaching responsibility. In one memorable year I determined to bring together concentrated study and actual preaching. Surrounding myself with the best available to me from modern Pauline scholarship, I literally lived with this man for six months, directed and taught by Adolph Deissman, James Stewart, Charles Harold Dodd, Robert Henry Lightfoot, and others.

Because the Philippian letter is the most direct, personal, and uncomplicated of Paul's letters, I resolved to preach straight through it, informing and correcting exegesis from the Greek text by the findings and insights of historians, exegetes, and theologians.

The result of this study and preaching — extending from Epiphany through Pentecost — was the establishing of a love affair with this towering and impassioned “man in Christ.” I came to know him with the quick and perceptive delight one has in a friend. Paul had been fused into an adoring, obedient, proclaiming, and explicating totality by the fire of his new relation to God in “this Son of God who loved me.” And the informing of all the parts of his writing by that rooted and vivacious new being in Christ, when beheld in concentrated study, opened huge new perspectives in every single verse or section. It is not necessary to add that such an exciting discipline makes quite unnecessary the weekly scrounging for a “text.”

It was a sort of added dividend that when Holy Week and Easter came around, progress through the letter had landed me precisely at Philippians 2:1-11: “And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him. . . .” That section, explicated on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter, had gained a momentum from the twelve preceding sermons on chapters 1 and 2 that was both powerful and full for the preacher and for the people.

The foregoing is an illustration, it is not a prescription. Each minister must order his or her life from the inside, and each must order it according to the requirements of interest, nature and parish situation. But to order it is a must.

The Teaching Authority of the Minister in the Reformed Tradition: A Contemporary Proposal

Richard Robert Osmer

There are few aspects of contemporary American religious life that are more problematic than the teaching authority of the minister. Authority in general is held in suspicion by many in our society today.¹ What professions are looked to for guidance and wisdom on matters of personal and social import? What professions are seen as teaching us the crucial truths around which we can orient our lives? Politicians? Business leaders? Doctors? Psychiatrists? Lawyers? It is difficult to give a straightforward answer to these questions. Certain individuals, perhaps, might be pointed to, but almost no profession carries the mantle of teaching authority in our society today.

The ordained ministry of the church seems neither better nor worse than other professions in this regard.² This is unfortunate, for across the centuries the ministers of the church frequently have occupied a unique position of teaching authority in the church and society.³ Members of the church have expected their ministers to offer them guidance and wisdom on how to live their lives. They have expected their ministers to offer authoritative teachings which allow them to place their own lives within the larger context of the divine life. And they have not been disappointed. The ministry frequently has been composed of some of the best-educated, most competent teachers in the entire society. Not only were they masters of Scripture and church tradition, but they also were some of the most knowledgeable interpreters of the surrounding culture. Their authority resided in their ability to mediate text to context in a manner so compelling that it freely elicited the trust and respect of their hearers.

The gradual decline of the teaching authority of the ordained ministry of the church is a story too long to be told here.⁴ It is enough to point out that it involved a shift in this profession's self-understanding, a shift that largely evolved in relation to new understandings of the church. These understandings of the church, in turn, emerged in conjunction with shifting social conditions. Many of the trends pointed to in other articles in this volume detail the kinds of institutional and cultural factors that have contributed to this changing understanding of the ministry and its teaching authority. Two recent trends in particular serve as the immediate context in which many ministers define their teaching authority in the present. These trends lie behind two very different understandings of teaching authority that are found in the church today.

The first trend is the emergence of modern individualism. This trend has been described in a number of recent books, Robert Bellah and his colleagues' *Habits of the Heart* and Roof and McKinney's *American Mainline Religion* being two of the more important.⁵ Both of these books describe a new, more extreme form of individualism that has become much more prevalent in our culture since the 1960s. It is a form of individualism in which each solitary person is seen as the arbiter of his or her own beliefs and moral commitments. These are determined in one of two ways: Either intuitively by looking inward and trying to assess whether something "feels" right (expressive individualism) or through a process of calculation in which costs and benefits are weighed in relation to individual fulfillment (utilitarian individualism).⁶

This trend has intensified the voluntarism that has always been a part of American denominationalism, giving rise to a new understanding of the church.⁷ As recently as a generation ago, denominational affiliation was determined by ethnicity, social class, and parental affiliation. Such factors have diminished greatly in the face of the new individualism.⁸ In the present, individuals shop around for a church in a manner resembling a spiritual supermarket: The church putting out the most pleasing product—

typically defined as programs meeting the “needs” of its clients—most successful at capturing and keeping new members.

Even when persons join a church, they do not expect or even desire that it offer them authoritative teachings on matters of personal and social import. Approximately 76% of all church members now agree that a person should arrive at his or her beliefs independent of a church or synagogue.⁹ Clearly, the new individualism is reshaping persons’ understanding of the church. The church is viewed primarily as a supportive, caring, therapeutic community which helps persons through times of personal crisis and lifecycle transition but does little to shape their fundamental beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Many ministers have internalized this understanding of the church and the kind of teaching authority which it implies. They think of their teaching authority primarily in terms of *process*. The minister’s task is to provide a process which helps people clarify their own values and beliefs. Scripture may function as a resource in this *process*, but it does not serve as a norm. In general, matters of substance and content are placed in a secondary position. The minister’s authority does not reside in his or her competence in faithfully representing an authoritative body of teaching or helping persons relate it to their lives, but in setting up a process by which individuals can determine what they believe themselves.

This process is viewed in a variety of ways. Many view it along therapeutic lines in which the minister empathetically reflects back what he hears the individual saying. Others view it as an educational process in which the minister’s primary task is to set forth a range of theological options and then allow people to choose the one which suits them best. Still others view it as a managerial process in which the minister functions as an enabler, helping the group set and implement its own goals.

What is common to all of these is the way the *process* takes precedence over substance or content. The minister’s authority

rests in his or her ability to provide a process by which church members determine their own beliefs and values. This is teaching authority shaped under the auspices of modern individualism. A markedly different understanding of teaching authority emerges when ministers shape their understanding in response to a second trend which is also found in contemporary American life: counter-modern authoritarianism.

Peter Berger, James Hunter, and others have identified groups and movements around the world which explicitly define themselves over against certain aspects of modern life.¹⁰ The Shiite revolution in Iran, for example, represents a rejection of the modernizing tendencies of the Shah. Similarly, the resurgence of the “spiritual” churches in Africa, which intermingle Christianity with such things as traditional African healing, represents a rejection of certain features of modern science.

In contemporary America, the cultural traditions which have tended to embody counter-modernizing tendencies most clearly are Protestant fundamentalism and certain forms of evangelicalism.¹¹ In these traditions, an attempt is made to reassert both the authority of the one true tradition over against the threats of modern reason and the authority of the community over against the supposed “narcissism” of self-actualizing individuals. The church is viewed as the guardian of pure faith which must be vociferously protected against the surrounding, pagan culture.

There is a growing number of ministers who view their teaching authority along the lines of counter-modern authoritarianism. They view themselves as standing at the apex of a chain of command in the church. They are the guardians of true Biblical teaching which they hand on to trusted church leaders. These leaders, in turn, hand these teachings on to other church members. Leadership is structured in an authoritarian, hierarchical fashion with the person at the top viewed as closest to God. Teaching authority, when defined in this way, focuses primarily on

content. Those at the top are the guardians of the “true” or “pure” content of orthodox faith.

Both of the forms of teaching authority which have just been described are accommodations to contemporary American life. This might seem odd in the case of counter-modern authoritarianism, for it frequently presents itself as standing over against modernity. Nonetheless, it too is a somewhat defensive response to the modern world, presupposing certain features of the very reality which it claims to reject. The heavy emphasis on individual religiosity in much contemporary fundamentalism, for example, surely is more reflective of modern subjectivity than Biblical faith.¹² Other examples of accommodation to modern culture could also be pointed to.¹³ Inevitably, the defenders of the faith take over the weapons of the enemy.

Neither of these understandings of the minister’s teaching authority represents a genuinely transformational response to present cultural and ecclesial conditions. Nor do they represent a genuine appropriation of the Reformed tradition. In the next section of this article, Calvin’s understanding of the teaching authority of the minister will be explored. The argument will be made that it provides us with an alternative, a third position beyond individualism and authoritarianism.

We cannot, of course, simply repeat what Calvin did in Geneva in mainline (even Presbyterian) churches today. As the great Yale historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, once pointed out: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”¹⁴ Hence, in the concluding portion of this article we will attempt to build on Calvin’s thought in projecting a viable understanding of the minister’s teaching authority relevant to our own context.

* * * * *

Calvin's understanding of the teaching office in general and the minister's teaching authority in particular are part of his broader break with the Roman Catholic church.¹⁵ In the paradigm of the teaching office that was in power at that time, the church's teaching authority is based on an understanding of the equal authority of Scripture and tradition.¹⁶ The "deposit of faith" given in Christ is seen as preserved in *both* Scripture and tradition. Neither has priority over the other.

According to this position, the Bible is a complex, difficult book. Different groups and individuals have interpreted it in different ways across the centuries. How can the church decide which interpretations are faithful to the original message of Jesus? God has established certain offices in the church which can teach authoritatively and, under certain conditions, even infallibly. The occupants of this teaching office are the bearers of tradition. Scripture can only be properly understood when interpreted through the official teachings of church tradition.

Moreover, this position argues, it is clear that the Bible does not address issues and needs which arise in different historical and cultural contexts. The church still must be able to address these issues in an authoritative fashion. Once again, the occupants of the teaching office are viewed as having the ability to offer teachings on matters of doctrine and morality that have the same weight as Scripture. These teachings must be believed and followed as a condition of salvation.

We see examples of this understanding of the teaching office even today in things like the Catholic teachings on birth control and abortion. These teachings must be obeyed for a person to be in good standing in the church and to participate in the sacraments by which grace is communicated and salvation procured. The recent guidelines on dissent by the theologians of the church, formulated by the Vatican Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, also reflects this heritage. Theologians are not to disagree publicly with the official

teachings of the church, even those which have not been defined infallibly. These teachings have an authority equal to that of Scripture and open dissent is seen as confusing the ordinary members of the church as to their importance.

To summarize, the Roman Catholic understanding of the teaching office which the Reformers encountered was one in which teaching authority was linked to specific offices in the church, typically conceived in a kind of pyramidal, hierarchical fashion: the pope, then the bishops, the priests, and the laity in descending order. The highest teaching authority was linked to the top of the pyramid.

Both Luther and Calvin had major difficulties with this understanding of the teaching office. At stake, they believed, was the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. When the leader-teachers of the church are seen as having the ability to define articles of faith and morality with such authority as to make assent to them a condition of salvation, then the church hierarchy becomes the mediator of grace. The free gift of forgiveness and new life offered in Christ now comes under the control of the church which can dispense it to whom it pleases.

The practical significance of the doctrine of justification is frequently noted in conjunction with the Reformers' rejection of the sacramental system of Roman Catholicism, especially its penitential dimensions. It is not always noted that the same theological criticism was also made against Catholicism's understanding of the teaching office. The Reformers argued that Christ and Christ alone is the mediator of salvation and that the church is but a faithful witness to that finished work.

This led the Reformers to a very different understanding of the teaching office in general and the teaching authority of the minister in particular. There are many similarities between Luther and Calvin in this matter, but I will focus on Calvin's thought in this article.

The most important shift which took place was a subordination of tradition and the church, as the creator and bearer of tradition, to Scripture. Scripture is seen as the primary witness to the gospel, and, as such, must serve as the norm by which the church measures its preaching and teaching. It is not hard to hear the polemical thrust against Roman Catholicism, when Calvin writes the following in the *Institutes*: “This, then, is the difference. Our opponents locate the authority of the church outside God’s Word; but we insist that it be attached to the Word, and do not allow it to be separated from it.”¹⁷

Scripture is now viewed as having priority over tradition and the church as a bearer of tradition. Scripture alone provides persons with the knowledge that is sufficient to salvation. Any teaching formulated by the leaders of the church must be tested against Scripture or it must be clearly stated that these teachings are not dealing with matters of ultimate salvation. This is the principle of *sola scriptura* that is so central to the Reformation.

When the Reformers affirmed “Scripture alone,” however, this did not mean that they eliminated a role for tradition altogether. This is a key point to make, especially with regard to Calvin. Often his humanistic inclinations led him to write about tradition in a pejorative fashion. This has led people to read him in two very different ways.

Some have seen Calvin’s affirmation of the distinctive authority of Scripture as pointing toward religious individualism. They see him as arguing that individuals are free to interpret the Bible for themselves, unconstrained by church authority and free to follow only the dictates of conscience. Others have seen him as pointing in the exact opposite direction. They argue that Calvin is the champion of a type of Christian orthodoxy in which the teachings of Scripture can be clearly identified, formed into doctrinal statements, and used as a measure of true faith. Within a generation of Calvin’s death, there were people who argued along these lines.

Neither an individualist nor authoritarian reading of Calvin is accurate, however. Contrary to an individualistic reading of his thought, Calvin affirmed the importance of communal authorities in the church's teaching ministry. A constellation of teaching authorities—representative bodies, theologians, catechisms, ministers, confessions, and congregations—were given legitimate authority in the church's life and in the formation of individual conscience.¹⁸ Contrary to an authoritarian reading, Calvin was deeply suspicious of all human authority. He was well aware of the mixed motives that humans bring to positions of power and authority and the capacity of systems to degenerate into corruption. The church is no exception to this rule, as his many negative comments about the Catholic church of his day make quite clear. He consistently argued for plural authorities in the church.

It is more accurate thus to view Calvin as offering an alternative to individualism and authoritarianism. This becomes evident if we examine any one of a number of agencies which are seen as having teaching authority in the church's life. Take church councils and the confessions which they periodically formulate. What kind of teaching authority do they possess? Do they possess the same kind of teaching authority found in Roman Catholicism, the authority to define articles of faith and morality that must be obeyed as a condition of salvation? No, they do not!

Rather, the authority of church councils resides in their capacity to articulate the central teachings of Scripture and to faithfully relate these teachings to their own cultural and historical context. Consistent with this principle, the Presbyterian Church does not have a single confession viewed as the one, perfect summary of Scriptural teaching. Rather, it has a book of confessions. Christ has been confessed in a variety of historical and cultural contexts in a manner faithful to Scripture. Church councils and confessions, like any other agency of the church, have teaching authority only to the extent that they carry out this task.

On the other hand, throughout the *Institutes*, Calvin repeatedly emphasizes the fact that church councils can err. He does this to counter Roman Catholic claims that the teachings of certain councils are binding on all church members. He asks the ministers and laity of the church to examine critically the formulations of church councils:

But whenever a decree of any council is brought forward, I should like men first of all diligently to ponder at what time it was held, on what issue, and with what intention, what sort of men were present; then to examine by the standard of Scripture what it dealt with—and to do this in such a way that the definition of the council may have its weight and be like a provisional judgment, yet not hinder the examination which I have mentioned.¹⁹

The teaching authority of church councils is finite and fallible. It must be examined critically and measured against the “standard of Scripture.”

In this brief examination of church councils, we begin to see how Calvin’s understanding of teaching authority represents an alternative to individualism and authoritarianism. On the one hand, individualism is ruled out. The individual is pictured as part of a community of interpretation which offers important guidance on how Scripture is to be read and obeyed. On the other hand, authoritarianism is rejected. The teachings of church councils always remain fallible and subject to sin. They must be critically examined in light of Scripture. Moreover, they are part of a larger constellation of teaching authorities in the church as a whole. Each confronts other centers of authority which can challenge, deepen, and correct its teaching.

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What does this have to say about the teaching authority of the minister? It helps us understand the crucial role played by both

content and *process* in the minister's teaching authority, to return to a distinction made in the first part of this article. Ordained to the ministry of the word, the minister's teaching authority derives from his or her calling to hand on the central teachings of Scripture. To recall Calvin's own words:

But where it pleased God to raise up a more visible form of the church, he willed to have his Word set down and sealed in writing, that his priests might seek from it what to teach the people, and that every doctrine to be taught should conform to that rule.²⁰

As we saw in our examination of church councils, the teaching authority of ministers is bound to and derived from their ability to faithfully hand on the teachings of Scripture. In other words, ministers are bound to a *determinant content*.

It is not enough to empathetically help others clarify their own beliefs and values in a therapeutic fashion. Nor is it enough to enable committees to set and implement their own goals. Ministers as teachers must do more than this. They have the authority and obligation of putting at the disposal of individuals and committees the Scriptural and theological content that has been acquired through years of study and education. If they are unwilling to help individuals and committees bring Scripture and theology to bear upon the circumstances before them, then who will?

Paradoxically, this calls for both simple transmission and creativity. In many ways, the teaching authority of ministers does not rest in their originality. It is not, in the first instance, a function of teaching the latest theological fad or even their own personal opinions. It is dependent upon a deep knowledge of and ability to communicate Scripture and the great doctrines of the church. The accent is not on originality.

Relating these teachings to a particular church, however, with its own unique story and set of circumstances, takes all of the

creativity a minister can muster. To be authoritative, the minister cannot simply hand on what has been received or repeat formulas from the past, but must bring theology and Scripture to life, addressing the concrete situations of real people and communities. This is analogous to the attempt by church councils to confess the Christ of Scripture in their own unique time and place.

Also like church councils, the teaching authority of ministers is fallible and subject to correction. As Calvin writes: “But if we must accept the teaching of all pastors without any doubting, what was the point of the Lord’s frequent admonitions to us not to heed the talk of false prophets?”²¹ Ministers in their teaching, thus, are bound to *a process*, a dialogical process. It is through the give and take of dialogue that their teaching is supported, challenged, and corrected.

Most importantly, this means that ministers cannot fall into the authoritarian trap of confusing their own teachings with those of God. They do not stand above the members of their congregations and must listen to the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of the faithful, as it comes to expression in the questions and insights of the elders and deacons and ordinary laypersons of their congregation. Their teaching authority is bound to a process of ongoing dialogue. The teacher must remain teachable.

This dialogue, however, is broader than that between ministers and their congregation. It includes the constellation of teaching authorities which have been pointed to already: theologians, representative bodies, seminaries, and denominational agencies. In the Reformed tradition, the individual ministers do not function as free agents with the liberty to teach whatever they please. Ministers are part of a broader and longer conversation. They are part of a living tradition which grounds them in the heritage of a community and challenges them to take into account the perspectives of others who are different than themselves. It is the give and take of this sort of dialogue that keeps the teachings of

ministers vital and open, able to bring the gospel to bear upon the realities—even hidden and unpleasant realities—of the day.

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It is fair to ask what all of this means concretely for the minister as he or she attempts to minister to a congregation. What difference would a revitalized sense of teaching authority make in the actual conduct of ministry? I believe that the difference would be enormous. Moreover, I believe that there are few things more important to the long term future of mainline Protestantism.

The first difference that a revitalized sense of ministers' teaching authority would make is a shift in their image of the church. The shift primarily would be from a pastoral church to a teaching church. The former primarily understands the church to be a place which meets people's needs. Under the influence of therapeutic attitudes and idiom, many ministers have made pastoral care their dominant understanding of the church's role and their own ministry. The church's purpose is to offer supportive, loving care in the face of life crises.

A teaching church, in contrast, projects a normative vision of the Christian life and attempts to foster an educational environment in which persons and congregations can live toward that vision. The dominant goal is not meeting people's needs but ongoing formation and transformation toward individual Christian maturity and faithful congregational ministry. Church members are not seen as "clients," but as saints who need to be equipped to carry out the work of service and witness in the name of Jesus Christ. In short, a teaching church believes that its members need a supportive, challenging educational context to help them continue to grow in the faith and contribute to the larger ministry of the church.

The second difference a revitalized sense of teaching authority would make is a reallocation of the way that most ministers spend their time. Ministers are under enormous pressure in terms of the many different demands placed upon them. From preaching to

administration to funerals, they must carry out many different tasks. Too often, their teaching ministry gets the short end of the stick. It is unrealistic to tell ministers that they must simply add on more teaching to their already-too-great work load. Rather, something more radical is being called for: a genuine reallocation of their time.

Ministers must begin to give up the undue amount of time they spend on administrative detail and on pastoral care. This is a pipe dream, of course, without the full consent of the governing body of the congregation. When you stop to think about it, however, there are far more capable caregivers and persons who can attend to administrative detail than competent teachers in the church. After three years of seminary education, the minister is uniquely qualified to teach Scripture and church doctrine. Unless the minister teaches regularly, it is safe to say that the officers and lay teachers of the church will not be grounded in the Bible and church doctrine. Moreover, crucial educational activities frequently taught by the minister, like confirmation, officer training, and new members class, will not be given the kind of time and energy they deserve.

As a teacher, the minister is indispensable. As a caregiver, the minister is not. The recent emphasis on pastoral counseling has led many ministers to think of pastoral care in terms of the assistance offered by highly specialized professionals. Of course, there is a role for pastoral counseling in the church, but it is a mistake to make this normative for the church's broader ministry of care. Historically, many pastoral care responsibilities have been carried out by the officers of the church—deacons, for example—as well as by the laity itself. In recent years, resources have begun to emerge that attempt to teach the laity basic skills of care in order to help them reclaim their proper role in this important ministry of the church. A reallocation of the minister's time in which teaching is a higher priority could actually enhance the ministry of the laity.

A third difference that a revitalized sense of ministers' teaching authority could make is a subtle shift in the way that they

approach the many other tasks that they perform. As the minister goes about his or her daily work, there are many opportunities for teaching, if they are only seized. Committee meetings, for example, are wonderful opportunities for ministers to bring their Scriptural and theological knowledge to bear upon the issue at hand. It is often in informal settings like these that some of the best teaching takes place. Similarly, preaching might be viewed in terms of its teaching potential. The kind of didactic preaching which was so important in the Reformation and the early church (during catechesis) might be given the attention it deserves. Historically, the pulpit has been the place where the ministers of the church have taught more of their members with greater effect than any other place.^{22'}

A fourth and final difference is more intangible, but it may be the most important of all. A revitalized sense of ministers' teaching authority could result in a shift in the ethos of their congregations. By "ethos," I mean the general climate and tone of congregational life. Ministers who are vitally concerned with the teaching ministry communicate this in a thousand ways. They give energy and enthusiasm to the educational program of the church, teaching in it themselves every chance they can. They make sure that this program receives the money it needs to flourish. They are constantly trying to enhance the already-existing program and are on the lookout for new curriculum and program ideas. They give support to other staff who carry out this ministry and special attention to the laity who teach. They make aptness to teach a criterion when considering nominations for church officers and committee appointments. In these and many other ways, they communicate the importance of the teaching ministry to their congregations.

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We began with the enormous social pressures which have shaped ministers' understandings of their teaching ministry. We have concluded with a brief examination of the difference it would

make if ministers resisted these trends and began to reclaim the importance of the teaching ministry as found in the heritage of the Reformation. Much depends on whether the ministers of the church will heed this call.

At stake, I believe, is the very future of mainline Protestantism in this country. The continued exodus of adolescents and young adults from our congregations is a sure and certain sign that the teaching ministry which they have received has not taken hold. The apathy and absence of life which characterizes so many mainline congregations seems closely related to their church's inability to teach a compelling vision of the Christian life. The well-documented presence of Biblical illiteracy in the mainline is one more sign that the pulse of the Reformation is beating weakly in these churches.

The church today is like the Ethiopian eunuch, returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, who is trying to read the book of Isaiah as he rides in his chariot. Philip approaches and asks: "Do you understand what you are reading?" In his reply, the Ethiopian gives voice to perhaps the most important question before the church today: "How can I, unless some one guides me?"

Notes

¹.See Richard Sennett's excellent discussion of this in *Authority* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1980).

².Perhaps the one notable exception to this is the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church, whose teachings on the economy and abortion have been quite influential, even beyond their own denomination.

³.A brief outline of the different understandings of the ministry is found in Joseph Hough and John Cobb's *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, California: Scholars Press 1985), ch. 1.

⁴.This is one of the central topics of my book *A Teachable Spirit: Recovering the Teaching Office in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

⁵.Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁶.In making this distinction, I am following *Habits of the Heart*.

⁷.Roof and McKinney refer to this as the “new volunteerism.” See chapter two of their book.

⁸.For a somewhat different account of this transformation, see Robert Wuthnow’s *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988)

⁹.Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, p. 57.

¹⁰.James Davidson Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983); *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Peter Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*. I have also found his essay, “From the Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity” thought-provoking in this regard. See *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age*, eds. S. Tipton and M. Douglas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), pp. 14-24.

¹¹.I follow Hunter in his interpretation of these religious phenomena.

¹².*Ibid.*, ch. six.

¹³. See Hunter's discussion of this in the chapter cited immediately above. See my discussion in *A Teachable Spirit*, pp. 42-45.

¹⁴. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 65.

¹⁵. I have discussed Calvin's and Luther's break with the Roman Catholic *magisterium* extensively in *A Teachable Spirit*, chapters six and seven.

¹⁶. For a helpful discussion of the various paradigms of the teaching office present throughout church history, see Howland Sanks' *Authority in the Church: A Study in Changing Paradigms*, American Academy of Religion Dissertation Series no. 2 (Missoula, Mont: Scholar's Press, 1974). An excellent discussion of the contemporary understanding of the teaching office in Roman Catholicism is Francis Sullivan's *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983).

¹⁷. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, ed. John McNeill, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 1162.

¹⁸. See my discussion of this in *Teachable Spirit*, pp. 119-20.

¹⁹. Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 1171.

²⁰. *Ibid.*, p. 1153.

²¹. *Ibid.*, p. 1175.

²². See Robin Maas' discussion of this in her wonderful article, "The Pastor as Biblical Interpreter and Teacher," in *The Pastor as Religious Educator*, ed. Robert Browning (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1989), pp. 83-106.