

Consensus

Volume 1 | Issue 1

Article 2

1-1-1975

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Adrian M. Leske

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Recommended Citation

Leske, Adrian M. (1975) "New Testament Directions for Future Ministry," *Consensus*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol1/iss1/2>

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NEW TESTAMENT DIRECTIONS

FOR FUTURE MINISTRY

When we become involved in church union discussions we find ourselves having to reconsider the roots of our theology and practice. Too often we have been content simply to turn back to our traditions and entrench ourselves in them. We fear that by giving up a traditional practice we shall be losing something of the essence of our faith. That does not say very much for our faith or the depth of our theology. But to fall back onto tradition has been one of the inherent evils of the church since its inception. Luther and other reformers condemned it in the Reformation. We need Luther's insight and flexibility today to separate the essential biblical theology from the traditions of the church in order to reconstruct a more earnest, living, united church for our age. Traditions are good for their particular time. They help to keep order in life and practice. They get things running smoothly in a groove. But as the environment and the needs change, that groove becomes a rut which hinders progress and draws the energy of the church away from its true purpose and goals.

The concept of ministry as much as anything else has been a cause of difference and division in spite of AND because of the fact that the New Testament gives no clear cut indication of one particular model which must be followed. Because of the unsettled and consequently flexible nature of ministry reflected in the meagre references in the New Testament we tend to approach this subject with our own preconceived ideas. We are not, therefore, primarily concerned at this point with the age-old disputes over ministerial authority, ordination of man or woman, or

apostolic succession. Rather our concern is essentially: What was “ministry” in the Church of the New Testament, and what are the implications for today

Jesus and Ministry

Two characteristics stand out in Jesus’ ministry and in the ministry to which he calls his followers. One is represented by the word “to send” (apostellein) and the other by the word “to serve” (diakonein).

Jesus speaks of himself as having been “sent” by God to carry out the Messianic mission. He takes his cue from the Messianic promise of Isaiah 61:1-2 (“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . .”, Luke 4:18). He is “sent” for the purpose of preaching the good news of the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43), but only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 15:24). As one who is sent, he speaks and acts with the authority and power of the Sender - the Father. He is his representative, his ambassador. He bears his image.

An integral part of representing the Sender is manifesting his love and mercy in service. Jesus tells his disciples: “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve (diakonein) and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28 - Is. 53:10. Cf. Luke 22:27).

So, in turn, Jesus sends forth his disciples, both the Twelve (Matt. 10, 5ff) and the Seventy (Luke 10:1ff). They are sent forth with his authority, as representatives of and bearing the authority of the Sender. They are to bear his image. So the Twelve are told: He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me, receives him who SENT me” (Matt. 10:40). And to the Seventy: “He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). So, too, the disciples are to be like Jesus having “service” as the fundamental characteristic of their ministry. Consequently, greatness in ministry is seen in the attitude of the disciple as a *servant* (diakonos) and *slave* (doulos) (Matt. 20:26-28). In fact, service becomes the basis for the judgment of all disciples in the final reckoning (Matt. 25:44). The service covers the whole of life under God in the fellowship of His children.

Apostles and Deacons

To carry on the work of service begun by him, Jesus chose the twelve apostles (the Sent Ones), instructed them, and gave them the definite commission to assist and extend his work of proclaiming the Good News, giving them the power and authority of God to do so. (Mark 3:13ff). As they shared in his service, so they would also share in his glory at the coming judgment (Matt. 19:28).

After the Resurrection, the Eleven are once again reminded of the divine authority their risen Lord has and so they are given the further directive now to

make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them the New Way (Matt. 28:18-20). They are sent now not just to the lost sheep of the house of Israel but also to Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Act 1:8).

After Pentecost there grew up in Jerusalem a unique Christian community, a community in which the Christians shared with one another the teaching of the apostles, partook together of the fellowship meal of the New Age, and prayed together (Acts 2:42). This fellowship meant a sharing of all things so that they had all things in common and there was not a needy person among them (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37). To this fellowship were drawn not only a great many who were "waiting for the consolation of Israel" in the predominantly spiritual sense, such as a great many of the lesser priests (Acts 6:7), but also many who had been hoping for vindication and justice which the Messianic age would bring also in a more economic sense, the poor and the needy, the afflicted and the oppressed. Consequently, there were many widows who were taken care of in this fellowship. Out of this situation grew another form of ministry - the ministry of the Seven.

The Seven were chosen by the entire community on the basis of their character, wisdom, and evidence of the Spirit of God at work in them. The apostles ordained them with prayer and by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:1-6). While these Seven were originally chosen to *serve* (diakonein) by being responsible for the fair distribution of goods daily to all who had need in the community, their ministry soon became involved also in preaching, similar to the ministry of the apostles. One of them, Stephen, became the first Christian martyr because of his astute proclamation of the Gospel. Another, Philip, was later known as an *evangelist* (Acts 21:8). Hence, as the need arose new ministries were initiated in the Church and these, in turn, changed form to meet the changing needs; sometimes supplementing, sometimes incorporating, previous forms of ministry.

James and the Apostles

Although we often see the Twelve as the leaders in the New Testament church, this leadership must in no way be understood as being organizational or administrative, or in any sense as bearing special authority over others. They were the Sent Ones - sent to proclaim the Kingdom. It is clear that the office of the keys, the authority to remit and retain sins, was given by Christ to the church as a whole, to his followers (mathetai). It was a priesthood of all believers (Matt. 16:16-20; 18:18-20; John 20:21-23). A non-apostle, James, soon became the leader of the church in Jerusalem. It is possible that he was chosen as leader because of the dynastic principle - he was the nearest male relative of the Messiah and so was his personal representative on earth until Christ's return. However, the important point is that the Twelve saw their calling primarily as being SENT to evangelize, to be on the move proclaiming the gospel and founding churches. Jerusalem was not of necessity a base of operation for all of them, and it is significant that at the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem he found no apostles there (Acts 21:18).

This concept of apostleship is seen also in Paul's claim to be an apostle. He was an apostle by virtue of the fact that he had been SENT by the Risen Christ as a witness of the Resurrection to preach the gospel to the gentiles (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1ff). He saw his ministry also as that of being a travelling missionary founding churches. The ministry of consolidation and administration had to be left to others.

The Elders

In Acts 14:23 we are told that Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in the churches they founded on their missionary journeys to be responsible for the continuing ministry in a particular place. Probably the office of elders was modeled upon the Jewish eldership of the Jerusalem Sanhedrin and the local presbyteries found in all organized Jewish communities. Thus the Christian elders must have had original responsibilities of a judicial nature as this pertained to the interpretation of permissible doctrine and usage and in the discipline of offenders against the Church's faith. This probably was extended to carrying out some kind of pastoral ministry (cf. James 5:14) and leadership in the church's worship. Certainly, in Jerusalem the elders joined with the apostles in judging matters of practice in the NT Church (cf. Acts 15). Following their Jewish prototype,

the elders would be chosen from the wiser and more experienced members of the community, usually but not necessarily "old" men. Vacancies, when no longer supplied by the apostles, would be filled by co-optation, with ordination to office by prayer and the laying on of hands of the apostle (if present) and the entire presbyterial group (cf. 1 Tim. 4:14).¹

Prophets and Teachers

The coming of the Messianic Age was always understood to bring with it a reawakening of prophecy, the continuous and authoritative proclamation of God's word for every occasion. God's word would be heard once more through holy men moved by the Spirit. Both men *and* women would show evidence of these special spiritual endowments (cf. Joel 2:28-29; Zech. 13:4-6; Mal. 4:5-6; Acts 2:14-21). Already in the Lucan infancy narrative we hear of Zechariah "prophesying" (1:67), of old Simeon, inspired by the Spirit, proclaiming the baby Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah (2:25-27), of Ana the "prophetess" (2:36). John the Baptist was the "prophet of the Most High", and Jesus Himself was

1. M. H. Shepherd, Jr., "Christian Ministry" *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, III (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 388.

often spoken of under that title also. Prophets in the New Testament church were understood as persons who had the ability to preach and build up the church in faith (Rom. 12:6), to "speak to men for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Cor. 14:3-5), to explain the deep things of the gospel and to impart true knowledge (cf. 1 Cor. 13:2), to point out the fulfilment in Christ of the Old Testament scripture (1 Peter 1:10). Foretelling of future events was more the exception than the rule.

With prophets were often coupled "teachers". Their function must have been very similar to that of prophets but with more of a catechetical emphasis. Paul ranks prophets and teachers immediately after apostles in the order of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:28; cf. Rom. 12:6; Eph. 4:11).

It appears that prophets and teachers were not always permanent in a particular community but travelled around to different communities as prompted by the Spirit. For example, Agabus from Jerusalem prophesied at Antioch and at Caesarea (Acts 11:28; 21:10). Nor are their functions necessarily separate from those of apostles and evangelists, since Paul and Barnabas were both numbered amongst the prophets and teachers at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3).

Other Forms of Ministry and the Ministry of Women

The New Testament uses other terms for ministry such as "evangelist" and "pastor". These should not be regarded as special ministries but rather as emphasizing certain aspects of ministry. Paul mentions other gifts in ministry such as the performance of miracles, or of healing, or speaking in tongues. Various pentecostal movements make much of these today. But the main point is that the early church recognized the diversities of gifts which were to be used by all for ministry in the church. It is clear that Paul saw ministry in the church primarily as a function and not as an office as we understand it today. Each member of the Church was to exercise his gift of the Spirit to the edification of all. These gifts were not mutually exclusive, nor were they of equal value. Besides, these charismatic ministries had to be tested, both as to their genuineness and as to their edifying effect. In the Pastorals references to false prophets and teachers who seek to satisfy their own egos grow in number, indicating the dangers inherent in certain charismatic ministries and the consequent brevity of their usefulness.

The term "bishop" (episkopos) with the general meaning of "guardian" or "overseer" was probably a general term used loosely for elders and others in leadership in the church. In the Pastorals it has taken on the meaning more of one who has the oversight of a number of congregations, each of which has its own elders.

From the beginning of the New Testament church it is evident that women played more than a passive role in the proclamation of the gospel. Peter's pentecostal proclamation of the fulfilment of the Joel passage that women would

prophesy was taken seriously. It was recalled that a woman shared in the initial proclamation from the temple of redemption being fulfilled in the baby Jesus. She was remembered as a "prophetess" (Luke 2:36). Priscilla is mentioned before her husband, Aquilla, as being responsible for expounding the way of God more accurately to Apollos (Acts 18:26). It is mentioned of Philip the evangelist that "he had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied" (Acts 21:8). The gospel means freedom from the strictures of society as well as from the oppression of sin and evil. Paul made this clear in another context to the Galatians (3:28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus." It appears that this equality in the gospel was maintained particularly in the gentile churches. Even in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul does not deny the right to women to pray and prophesy publicly in the congregation provided she does not negate her prayer and prophecy in the minds of her hearers by failing to follow social custom. In the light of this, Paul's reference to women not being permitted to speak in the churches (1 Cor. 14:34; cf. 1 Tim. 2:11) probably refers to something other than the gospel proclamation, preaching and prophesying.

Some Conclusions

First of all, it is evident in the New Testament that new ministries were begun as different needs arose in the Church. When a particular type of ministry was no longer useful it disappeared.

Secondly, there were various kinds of ministry within the Church and even within a congregation, working simultaneously, overlapping and complementary.

Thirdly, each member was expected to be carrying out a ministry in the fellowship. Thus, it was the responsibility of each to teach and admonish each other in all wisdom, to confess to one another, to forgive one another, and work together for the mutual upbuilding of the Church. This was not merely a multiple ministry in each congregation, but a total sharing ministry.

It follows from this that our ministry for the future must become much more flexible than it has been. We need to recognize the ministries of those not trained in Seminaries as much as those who are. The concept of sharing ministries in a congregation must be more fully implemented. The church must be more sensitive to changing needs and to the gifts God has given to his church to satisfy those needs without having to cut through a lot of ecclesiastical red-tape. In other words, the church needs to become young again to be alive to its task of being the body of Christ.

Adrian M. Leske,
Edmonton, Alberta.