

The Ministry of “the Ordained” and “the Laity”

(2 Corinthians, chs. 3-6)

Presentation I. Are there two distinct ministries? Yes, the “new” ministry vs. the “old ministry,” but not the ordained vs. the lay.

1. Currently we seem preoccupied with the distinction between ordained and lay ministries (ELCA, BEM.) If only to understand that distinction, we need urgently to subordinate it to another, more basic distinction: Paul’s distinction between “the ministry of death” vs. “the ministry of the Spirit” (the one “kills,” the other “makes alive”), “the ministry of condemnation” vs. “the ministry of righteousness,” the ministry “of the old covenant” (“carved in letters on stone”) vs. the ministry “of a new covenant” (“not in a written code but in the Spirit.”) (3:5-11)
2. What makes Paul’s prior distinction urgent is that it is being badly obliterated, and that it is obliterated not by people outside Christianity—say, in Judaism, which is not the primary concern even for Paul—but rather (as in Corinth) in the Christian congregations themselves. For a Christian community to perpetuate the “old” ministry which has “faded away” (3:11) as if it had not, not only is out of date and reactionary, it is deceitful and fatal.
3. The danger of suppressing the distinction lies not with the apostolic leadership (“clergy”) alone, though they bear the greater accountability. Leaders and congregations (“laity”) alike, both subject to this treacherous amnesia,

aid and abet each other. And both need each other's help.

4. So when Paul writes, "Having this ministry by the mercy of God we do not lose heart" (4:1), what is "this ministry?" In contrast to what other ministry? It is not his ministry of apostolic preaching vs. the ministry of tent-making but rather "the ministry of the Spirit" vs. the now outmoded "ministry of death." Historically, both ministries might have been quite ordainable, and on the highest authority. But now only one of them is worthy of the people of Christ. Nor ought they settle for anything less.
5. Brief excursus on what is meant, in Paul's day and ours, by this "new" ministry, especially in light of his emphasis upon its "unveiled" "openness." (chs. 3&4)
6. When the antithesis between the two ministries is minimized or suppressed, what results is that the attention then shifts to the "messengers"—to the messengers not as opposed to their hearers (that too, perhaps) but as opposed to their Message. Then the drive is on for the messengers ("clergy") to "commend" themselves (3:1; 4:2). As if it were the messenger who made the Message, rather than vice versa.

Presentation II. The ministry of the church of Christ is really one new ministry though in two stages, first the ministering of the Message and then the embodying of that Message. Here lies the clue to the distinction between the "ordained" and the "lay," and to their oneness.

1. What defines the ordained ministry is that it is apostolic. Apostolos means messenger, and what the ordained are ordained for is messengership. There is only one thing, finally, which commends them or discommends them, as ordained, before God and world: do they "refuse to tamper with God's word" which they are sent to deliver, is what they transmit "an open statement of the truth,"

- the authentic “good news of the glory of Christ?” (4:2, 4)
2. Granted, all Christians at one time or another function as apostolic messengers, in their parenting for example, yet that is not what defines them as parents. That is what makes a pastor a pastor, however, her Message-bearing. True, she also does what laypeople do, she receives the Message, she believes it, she embodies it. Still, that is not why she is ordained.
 3. If the ordained are to the laity as messengers are to addressees, then the laity too are distinct from the ordained only in that same reciprocal relation, as hearers are distinct from their speakers. The distinction is important, but only because neither speaking nor hearing has any point without the other.
 4. The reason neither has any point without the other is that the whole point of the Message, spoken or heard, is Christ. Otherwise the focus of the speakers would have to be on themselves, on their own “commendations,” and the focus of the hearers would have to be on their own rights to approve or disapprove the speakers. That would be a relapse into the old “ministry of death.”
 5. Instead, just as the ordained are messengers of Christ, the hearers in turn (the “laity”) so embody the Christ they hear that they themselves become his Message, “a letter from Christ,” delivered by the ordained, but “to be known and read by all people.” (3:2, 3)
 6. The Messengers are ordained to be in service, “slaves,” to the addressees. Yet the addressees are not by that token the messengers’ masters. Christ is. (4:5) And it is by “God” that the messengers are “commissioned,” “qualified.” (2:17; 3:6) Conversely, just think how well the laity are served when the “lord” is not they and not the clergy but Christ.
 7. But all of this depends upon the ministry of both, laity

and ordained, being “the ministry of the new covenant.” In any practical discussion of ministry that comes first.

(RWB, 4/88)