

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for April 11: Ministry done right: The right stuff

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The modern church has a distorted view of the meaning of the words “ministry,” “minister” and “calling.” Ministry might best be defined in a Christian context as one believer using his or her spiritual gifts for the needs of a person in need. It would follow then a minister is one who does ministry. Calling is the impetus of God’s Spirit encouraging acts of ministry.

The distortion comes when either term is used to describe those who have been set aside by God to do ministry vocationally. They are described as having been “called into the ministry.” So prevalent is this misunderstood use of these critical words, many laypersons have backed away completely from performing acts of ministry, deferring to the professionals.

The truth is, Scripture places the calling of ministry squarely on the shoulders of every member of the body of Christ. Paul was uniquely qualified to present this truth. Many in the early church failed to recognize Paul’s apostolic calling because he received his calling differently from the other apostles. Many early Christians believed Paul lacked the right stuff. In 2 Corinthians, Paul not only defends his own calling but clearly indicates the calling to ministry is a calling for every Christian.

The right credentials (2 Corinthians 2:14-17; 3:4-5)

Paul immediately uses an illustration that would have been recognizable to his readers, “thanks be to God, who always leads us in his triumph in

Christ.” (2:14). In ancient days, a conqueror would return from battle in what was described as a triumph.

It was much like a parade, a celebration of victory. The conqueror would come first, followed by the spoils of war. The conquered king or captain would come next, often bound and shackled. Prisoners of war were brought back as slaves and they, too, were a part of the triumph. Finally there would be the soldiers returning home victorious from battle.

The use of such a term would have been a visual reminder that the battle had not been won by a singular captain or conqueror. Victory had been won because of the participation of every soldier in the army, from the greatest to the least.

Paul’s analogy is obvious. The battle being fought for the kingdom of God involves every believer and not just those who are perceived to have the right credentials.

To further illustrate his point, Paul reminds the Corinthian church that no one, common believer or professional clergy, is adequate to be called into the battle of ministry. Paul says, “our adequacy is from God” (3:5). God has always used “the weak things to confound the wise” (1 Corinthians 1:27). To believe God has only called a segment of believers into his service would be to deny his very nature.

The right character (2 Corinthians 3:18-4:2)

Having clearly established the clear calling of every believer, Paul does indicate a necessary qualification. This qualification does not separate Christian from Christian, but Christian from non-believer.

Earlier in chapter 3 Paul gives indication it is the Spirit of God, placed in the believer at the time of conversion, that qualifies the believer for ministry (vv. 16-17). Paul seems to want to emphasize the need to

differentiate between outward signs of calling and inward signs of calling. Paul uses Moses as an example of the signs of outward calling (v. 15). God's people knew Moses had received God's calling from the glory revealed on his face. Now the glory of God is revealed in the hearts of believers called to minister in his name.

Ministry without the presence of God's Spirit lacks authenticity. When the Spirit of the Lord is present there is freedom to do ministry (2 Corinthians 2:17) and there is boldness (2 Corinthians 3:12) both of which are external evidences of an internal relationship and calling.

The right focus (2 Corinthians 4:5-6, 16-18)

Christian ministry must possess right motives. The world is filled with religious charlatans, people willing to provide religious assistance at the right price. True ministers of the gospel have but one set of motives: to present Jesus Christ as Lord (v. 5) and "to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (v. 6). In short, Christian ministry never brings glory to the minister but always reflects the glory toward the one who is worthy to receive it.

Not wanting Christians to become disillusioned when they engage in ministry, Paul issues a warning: Ministry can be challenging. Paul warns, "do not lose heart" (v. 16). He further gives insight that suggests ministry can be destructive to both the "inner man" and the "outer man" (v. 16).

Here is a warning applicable to all believers who engage in ministry, but particularly important to vocational ministers. Engaging in ministry is physically and emotionally depleting. To be effective long term, the minister must take time to be "renewed day by day" (v. 16). Far too many ministry professionals are experiencing burnout today and they should pay attention to Paul's word of caution.

Conclusion

Paul brings his treatise to a brilliant conclusion. It is a reminder of why ministers must possess the right credentials, the right character and the right focus: "The things which are seen are temporal, the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18). Ministry done in Christ's name has lasting importance. Doing even the least act of service can have an eternal consequence.

Ministry is a high calling. It is a privilege to realize God's has invited all of his children to join him in the work he is undertaking.