

2nd Opinion: A pastor by any other name ..

October 6, 2011

"What is your occupation?" A pagan sailor questioned the runaway prophet Jonah as Jonah fled from the call of God (Jonah 1:8). The question brought him back to his mission and his ministry.

Two current trends in pastoral ministry seem to indicate modern-day pastors may need to hear this same question.

One development is an increasing shortage of ministers. Every survey indicates the number retiring far exceeds the number entering the ministerial profession.

The second trend is the one I wish to address: The plethora of new titles church pastors prefer to identify their role—senior minister, chief administrator, executive pastor and even CEO, or chief executive officer—ad infinitum, ad nauseum! The two trends may be related.

Ministers and ministry have been my life. After three decades of pastoral ministry in churches, ranging from small student pastorates to fast-growing suburban and large downtown congregations, I then taught hundreds of ministers for 15 years in a Southern Baptist seminary. Also I have served as interim pastor in numerous churches.

One of my special interests is ministerial ethics. At the seminary, I developed a class and a textbook in which students explored the role of the minister and wrote a code of ethics as their final task. A clear understanding of the ministerial vocation and the ethical demands of ministry are absolutely essential. Otherwise, the overseer of the congregation of Christ will lead his flock astray.

To current ministers who prefer titles that focus on rank, authority and chain of command, I ask: What is your occupation? What is your vocation? Exactly how do you interpret your call from God?

Is your calling to be the CEO of the church? Or to be the senior administrator? Do you prefer to be called the executive pastor? Why?

Now, please, don't argue that in the modern world, the church organization has to have structure. That's always been true. My question to ministers who desire a title that emphasizes their authority is this: Is your calling to be a servant or to be the ultimate authority in the church? Must you always have the last word?

I know, as one former student told me, that it is so much easier to pastor a church that does not have business meetings, budget hearings or a vote to call a minister. Yes, dictatorships are very efficient. But over time, people tire of being puppets. And, by the way, the priesthood of believers is still a biblical teaching.

Jesus' call to discipleship is clear. It is exemplified in foot washing (John 13:5), self-denial and cross-bearing (Luke 9:23). How often Jesus had to remind his disciples that seeking places of preeminence had no place in the kingdom of God (Matthew 20:20-27).

The Apostle Paul echoes Jesus' words. "We have this ministry ... for we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:1, 5).

So my plea and my charge to fellow ministers is simple—stop your flight to Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). Forget about titles and authority that give you power, prestige or preeminence. Remember the only time Paul referred to himself as "chief" was when he called himself the "chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). So are we all!

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