

The Essence of the Ministry

The opening address given by the Rev William Macleod at the Free Church Seminary in September 2006.

What is essential to the ministry – the main job? On what should we expect our ministers to be spending most of their time? What should divinity students be aspiring to be?

Negatives

It is useful first of all to set out some of the mistaken priorities. **1) Social Worker:** We live in a needy world. The early church discovered this. Some widows were suffering neglect (Acts 6:1). Jesus said that we would always have the poor with us. He Himself showed great love and compassion to the sick. Our Christianity must be practical. But it would be easy for a minister to spend all his time visiting the old, the sick, the lonely and the needy. Such work is good and would be highly praised, but it is not the main work of the minister. Deacons were appointed in the early church to do that work (Acts 6:3). **2) Administrator:** Every minister must be involved in some administration. Some have particular gifts in this area and enjoy it. Yet serving tables is not our job. Ministers must beware of burying themselves in administration while neglecting what is more essential to their calling. **3) Businessman:** We need money to live. Some ministers are gifted as businessmen or tradesmen. In small congregations or mission situations it may be necessary for a minister to work part-time to support his family. Paul engaged in tent-making at Corinth. But such work should be kept to a bare minimum and the aim should be to lay it aside as soon as possible. The whole idea of the minister's stipend is that he should have enough to live on and so be able to dedicate himself full-time to the work. **4) Nanny:** Some ministers' wives work and the Bible does not condemn that. The virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 sought wool and flax and worked willingly with her hands, she considered a field and bought it and she planted a vineyard. But the minister is not to be a child-minder while his wife works in order that they can have a higher standard of living – luxurious food, clothes and holidays. The stipend should be sufficient. The minister and family should be an example in living within their means. Of course the minister should help with some of the household chores. A break from the study to take the children out or to do the vacuuming or dishwashing can be beneficial

rather than detrimental. But there is a danger today of idolising the family. They are made more important than the church. While it must be admitted that some of the old missionaries neglected their families yet we must not forget the warning of Christ, 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple' (Lk.14:26). **5) Gossip:** As the minister goes around the congregation and as he phones friends he must be very careful that he does not become a gossip. It is possible to spend the time in idle words, or, even more harmfully, in passing on destructive comments about others. It is beneficial to have one or two close friends with whom many things can be shared but there are dangers. Email is another method of gossip. Time is precious and is easily wasted. **6) Entangled:** Paul warns Timothy, 'No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier' (2Tim.2;4). Hobbies and interests can be useful in a minor way in allowing the minister to relax and regain his strength. However, they have a danger of taking over and Satan knows how to use them. They must be kept firmly in their place. Like an Olympic athlete, the minister must be a man of one thing. **7) Campaigner:** There are many good causes looking for the support of active and gifted ministers. It is possible to spend one's time campaigning against the destruction of the unborn child, third world debt, the homosexual takeover, sex shops and gambling when one should be preaching the gospel. We all have our duty in these matters. But the minister must remember his main calling. **8) Superman:** Many ministers these days are suffering from stress and depression. The problem is that they forget what their job is, and try to do the Holy Spirit's work for Him. They blame themselves for their lack of success. If only they did what such and such a minister does or did, they would be bound to have a growing church. They despair because they see no conversions or additions to the church. They forget that even the gifted Paul could only plant the seed but God had to give the increase.

Positives

1) Prayer: The apostles wished deacons to be appointed to administer the charity and added, 'But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word' (Acts 6:4). This is what the Christian ministry is all about. It is far easier to be a social worker, an

administrator, a campaigner than one who labours in prayer and the ministry of the word. It is important too to notice the priority given here to prayer. It is mentioned before preaching. Prayer is difficult. When we try to pray Satan reminds us of many other things that we must get done. Seldom is there any sense of achievement in praying. It cannot be parceled into ten minutes or half an hour so that when you have spent that time you know the job is done. Hours can pass and a man feels that he has not begun to pray. Jesus, after a day's preaching, would often go aside to pray. He would sometimes arise long before daybreak to pray. Occasionally He would spend the whole night in communion with God. Daniel fasted and prayed for days. Paul speaks of labouring night and day in prayer. To labour in prayer is a fascinating concept. It is not the mere reciting of a list before God. Rather it involves energy and earnestness and sweat. How little we know of wrestling in prayer! The minister must pray for his own soul, confess his sins, repent and plead for forgiveness. He prays for growth in grace, sanctification, assurance and perseverance. He must give thanks, praise and adore God. He must seek guidance, protection from immorality and heresy, faithfulness and humility and plead for the Spirit's blessing upon his labours. He must pray for his family, friends and neighbours, for his congregation, church, nation and generation. He must ask for revival. In prayer he seeks knowledge of the Lord and His presence. Nothing is achieved without prayer. Instead of looking to ourselves we look to God for everything and must give Him all the glory. The man in the pew has his daily work, the woman, even when she does not work outside the home, will have many chores, only the minister can give himself wholeheartedly and constantly to prayer. We are paid to pray. In many ways this is the hardest part of our ministry. The flesh hates it. The mind wanders. Satan worries us like a terrier at our heels. Yet 'the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits' (Dan.11:32). **2) The Ministry of the Word:** It is hard to justify just spending Saturday and Sunday preparing sermons. The whole week is to be occupied in the ministry of the word. The Bible must be studied for the edifying of our own soul, applying it first to ourselves. Good books must be read to keep oneself fresh. In preparing sermons the original languages have their part to play and also dictionaries and commentaries. Time must be spent digesting the passage, meditating on its significance and working out its applications. Many ministers fail in preaching because they do not spend enough time reflecting on what they are to say,

preparing the ideas and even the words they will use. The minister is called to be a preacher. He is to proclaim the word of the Lord in the assembly of God's people and to sinners wherever they will gather to listen. As well as the public proclamation he can minister informally in Bible studies and fellowships. In Acts 20:20 Paul speaks of teaching the word in Ephesus not only publicly but from house to house. The minister is to be a visitor. As he goes around it is not to deal in pleasantries but to teach God's word. Pastoral and evangelistic visitation is important. Paul also wrote letters and we can by letters, phone-calls and emails labour in the word and make known the gospel. We must keep on reminding ourselves what our job is as ministers. The devil will discourage and distract. Congregations are to remember what their minister is employed to do. Pray without ceasing. Pray earnestly and persistently. Fill your mind with the word and be constantly scattering the seed. Though much falls on the pathway and some on rocky ground or among thorns, some will also surely fall on good ground and bring forth fruit. There is a promise that the word of God shall not return unto Him void (Is.55:11).

Rev William Macleod (September 2006)