



# PRIORITIES FOR THE CHURCH

REDISCOVERING LEADERSHIP AND VISION IN THE CHURCH



DONALD MACLEOD

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Donald Macleod is Principal of the Free Church of Scotland College in Edinburgh, Scotland, where he also lectures in Systematic Theology. He has written several books for Christian Focus. He is regularly called on to present the Christian viewpoint on current issues on radio and television, and frequently writes newspaper articles. His other books include:-

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## INTRODUCTION

This is a short book, but it was long in the making. All but one of the chapters originally appeared in the *Monthly Record* during my time as editor (1978–1991). The remaining article, ‘The Basis of Christian Unity,’ was first published in *Evangel*, journal of Rutherford House, Edinburgh.



Why re-publish them now? My only defence is that whatever the inadequacies of the answers, the questions these articles address are as urgent today as they were twenty years ago. Preaching is at a discount. Ministers are confused as to their role. Ecumenical advance is blocked by the non-negotiable assumptions of those who masquerade as the most enthusiastic advocates of Christian unity. And Christianity remains discredited by lamentable discord and division.



All these issues have followed us into the new millennium. Eventually, one hopes, they will command the rigorous attention of the great scholars of the church. In the meantime, the merely journalistic contributions which make up this book may help to focus Christian minds and stimulate Christian thought.

As ever, I am grateful to Christian Focus Publications, and particularly to the Editor, Malcolm Maclean, for their patience, courtesy and expertise.

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**T**here is never an appropriate time to write about the ministry. Those still actively engaged in it are too closely involved and too inclined to major on what they themselves do best. Those who have left (especially to work in theological colleges) live in ivory towers, out of touch with reality. But someone must talk about it.

Ministers today, in all denominations, face a role-crisis. What is expected of them? Are these expectations biblical? And to what extent can they be fulfilled?

### **General principles**

Let's begin with two general principles.

First of all, the minister must be a human being. The point is not quite as obvious as it seems. 'One of my brothers,' said an American wag, 'is a minister. The other is a human being.' It is something we easily lose. Indeed, some of us lose it deliberately, as if we had to choose between ministry and humanity. We don't dress like humans. We don't speak like humans (especially when we're preaching). We don't have to worry about mortgages and redundancy; or about budgetary constraints and efficiency studies. We feel unable to admit weakness, fallibility or temptation. We cannot have ordinary social lives ('Don't have friends in the congregation!' used to be very common, and very bad, advice).

The only remedy is to refuse to be put into this mould. Ordination should not change us overnight. We should keep our old friends, guard against humbug and pretentiousness, admit our own limitations, ask for help, accept help and give thanks for help. We should meet the rest of the congregation in as many ordinary situations as possible and expect no more deference from them than we are prepared to extend in return. As far as possible we should live as they live, sharing their fears and frustrations.





Priorities for the Church

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This is not some concession to a passing fad. It is absolutely imperative. Without humanity we are useless. We cannot even pray for our people unless we feel with them. The Lord Himself, after all, had to be a compassionate and faithful High Priest; and He could only be such by being touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

Secondly, if we may be forgiven a moment of jargon, all ministry must be contextualised. General principles there may be, but they have to be applied in very particular situations. Our minds may be steeped in the theological literature of the seventeenth or the nineteenth century, but we are ministering in the twenty-first. Our roots may be in the Highlands, our ministry in the Lowlands. Our predilection may be for rural life, our vocation in the city. Our personal Bible may be the NIV., that of our people the KJV. All such details demand adjustment, and maybe even sacrifice, on our part. The strange thing is that many men who would be perfectly prepared to contextualize if sent to Indonesia, are often reluctant to do so when sent to Airdrie or Achiltibuie. Yet the principle, again, is a fundamental one. We have to be all things to all men. Part of what it means to be called to the ministry is to be spiritually sensitive, able to read situations and to work out exactly what is called for. Are we in the Highlands or in the Lowlands? Are we facing intellectuals or artisans, spiritual babes or spiritual giants, a church with long traditions or a church with none? We will only make such judgments, of course, if we accept the need to distinguish between the gospel and our cultural baggage. What belongs to the gospel cannot be abandoned. What is purely cultural can. Justification by faith is an essential in every church. Having preparatory services prior to Communion is not.





## The Ministry Today

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### **The ministry of the Word**

But what are our specific expectations?

Most obviously that the minister will be a preacher and teacher. It has to be conceded at once that he is not the only one charged with such responsibilities and should not feel threatened or resentful when other members of the congregation engage in various forms of teaching. All elders, for example, are expected to be ‘apt to teach’. Parents are expected to instruct their children, older women to teach younger women and all of us to give a good account of our faith. And it would be a sad day if our churches no longer had their Priscillas and Aquilas to look after promising young converts. In short, all Christians have a teaching ministry. This was a marked feature of the life of the early church: so much so in fact that one of the Fathers commented, ‘In the beginning all taught and all baptised.’

What distinguishes the minister is that preaching and teaching is his life’s work: his major, and indispensable, contribution to the church. Others may do it occasionally: he labours at it. He has, as we shall see, other tasks as well. But these are things he shares with others. What the church needs from him is preaching. If he doesn’t supply it the whole body suffers; and it is no compensation that he is a nice man, a good visitor, or an expert at repairing drains or making sandwiches.

How can we hope to do it well?

First, by making it our priority. It’s what ministers exist for: what they’re supposed to give their best strength to. Being a preacher is not simply an activity. It’s a lifestyle. It shapes our perception of everything that goes on around us. The outstanding example of this is the Lord Himself. Birds and lilies, sowing and harvesting, fishing and commerce, shepherding, vine-dressing and children playing: all were grist to the mill of his teaching and preaching. A good preacher never switches off.



## Priorities for the Church

Secondly, by making sure that we spend every forenoon in our studies. Sadly, things are such in the churches today that men feel ashamed if found with a book. The moment we sit in our studies the Devil brings to mind the people we haven't visited, the letters we haven't written and the thing we meant to discuss with the Clerk of the Deacons' Court. There is only one answer: a *cordon sanitaire* around the hours from nine to one. They should be absolutely sacred. There is no excuse for a minister being seen out of doors before lunchtime. Apart from the occasional funeral, every morning is his own. More precisely, it is his congregation's: to be spent for them in the closet, engaged in prayer and in study of the Word of God. It should not even be a time of sermon preparation. It should be a time of self-preparation: feeding our souls, filling our minds and stimulating our mental and spiritual processes. During these times the preacher communes with God, pores over the word and enjoys the fellowship of the great master-preachers and master-theologians of all ages. Having spent the week in God's market, there is some hope that he can then provide his people with the feast they deserve.

There is nothing at all unrealistic about this. A preacher who has no time for study is like a professional footballer who has no time for training. Certainly the pressure of work is no excuse. C. H. Spurgeon found (or made) time in an incredibly busy life to read six books a week. Daniel Rowland, the outstanding preacher of the Methodist revival in Wales, was an obsessive student: 'When at home,' wrote his biographer, 'he spent most of his time in his study, and it was almost impossible to get him out of it, according to the testimony of his daughter. Early in 1738 Howell Harris heard that Rowland was studying so hard that "he lost his hair and sleep".' Such men are surely a rebuke to us. But the reason for their commitment to study was simple: preaching mattered more to them than anything else in the world.





The Ministry Today

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Which brings us to the third thing: effective preaching depends on our being obsessed with our craft. It is fashionable today to despise homiletics. The contempt is difficult to understand. Paul, after all, preached in weakness and fear and much trembling. He was afraid of himself. Was he doing it right? Was the content right? Was the presentation right? These questions obsess all preachers; and they will seek help wherever it can be found. They will observe others at work. They will read the great preachers of the past (and of the present). They will read their biographies, looking for the secret of their power. And they will read every book on homiletics they can lay hands on: Shedd, Dabney, Alexander, Brooks, Spurgeon, Blaikie, Beecher, Blackie, Stalker, Black, Stewart, Mackenzie, Lloyd-Jones and everyone else.

Fourthly, the preacher must be fully involved with his people. His responsibility, after all, is to take the Word to the world; and to do that he must know both. He gets to know the Word in his study. He can get to know his people only by meeting them: as far as possible, on their terms. Then his preaching will be truly pastoral, aimed, not at his fellow theologians, nor at the Christians he knew in his youth, nor at the church of the past, but at the people actually sitting in front of him. He will know their problems, fears and hang-ups; their lack of assurance; their difficulties at work; their doubts; their ethical dilemmas; their backslidings. He will know what they're interested in; what they read; what they watch on television; and what they're taking in of what they hear on Sundays. He will know the spiritual risks they face. And he will choose his texts accordingly, earthing his preaching in the needs of real people. He will work out not simply what the text means in a historico-grammatical sense but what it's saying here and now to his people. He will never be content simply to explain it. He will apply it; and he will apply it to those sitting in front of him.





## Priorities for the Church

Fifthly, the minister must realise that there are more ways of preaching and teaching than standing in a pulpit delivering sustained, logical, uninterrupted discourses. These are, obviously, enormously important. There is abundant biblical precedent for them and God has blessed them mightily. In fact, as the examples of Edwards, Whitefield, Rowland, MacDonald and many others show, this is what He has normally used to bring revival to His church. But it is not the only way. Preaching does not necessarily presuppose a large audience. When Philip spoke to the Ethiopian Chancellor in a one-to-one situation, that was preaching. In the old days in Scotland, ministers practised catechizing, which obviously involved a high degree of audience participation. Men like Hog of Kiltarn in Scotland and Daniel Rowland in Wales made regular use of Fellowship Meetings. The need today is even more pressing. Ministers must get down from their pulpits to listen to their people, answer their questions, meet their objections and hear their suggestions. And, of course, to ask their own questions. Apart from all else, the exercise will give us some indication of our own effectiveness. It can be a salutary experience after many years in a congregation to hear people speak in a way that betrays all too clearly that they still haven't grasped the most fundamental principles of Christianity. The test then is whether we blame the people for their obtuseness or ourselves for our inadequacy as preachers.

### **Counselling**

But preaching is not the only thing. The minister is also a counsellor, expected to encourage, admonish and to give advice on a wide range of behavioural and emotional problems. As such problems multiply so the pressure for help becomes greater; and since such a ministry seems, at least on the face of things, rewarding and meaningful, many



## The Ministry Today

‘feel this is what they should be doing’. This creates its own dangers, not least for the concept of the ministry itself. In America, particularly, many have abandoned a ministry of the word for a ministry of counselling. This leads, in turn, to pressure for changes in ministerial training. The traditional curriculum, with its emphasis on biblical and theological studies, prepared men to preach. Now there is an increasing demand for men trained to counsel and for a curriculum weighted in favour of psychology, sociology and related disciplines.

How should we react? By keeping a sense of biblical proportion. This involves several factors.

First, we have to recognise that many Christians urgently need counselling. They are discouraged, depressed, backslidden, living in sin, missing from church meetings, dabbling in drink, indulging in sinful relationships, worldly. They are failing as husbands and wives, as parents and children. They are having difficulties at work. They are ridden with doubt. Such problems are too often ignored, sometimes because too many people (including the minister) feel, ‘It’s none of my business!’, sometimes because people feel helpless and sometimes because people feel they would be compromised by talking to the disgraced. Our glaring failure in this area is one of the main reasons for leakage from the church in recent years.

Secondly, the minister was never meant to bear the whole burden of pastoral ministry on his own. Apart from all else, it is physically impossible. Counselling is a labour-intensive activity. A man who makes himself available day and night to half-a-dozen people with serious behavioural problems will soon find that he has little time for sleep and none at all for sermon preparation. The pattern God has established in His word is that the pastoral burden is to be shared. All elders are pastors, charged with oversight and endowed with the



## Priorities for the Church

gifts needed to encourage and admonish their flocks. But the responsibility doesn't end even with the elders. All Christians have pastoral responsibilities. Paul makes this clear in 1 Thessalonians 5:14: 'We beseech you, brethren, warn those that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak.' The burden does not fall on the office-bearers: it falls on the brethren (and, of course, on the sisters as well). Many problems escalate only because those close to them choose to ignore them. If all of us, not least the women of the church, accepted our pastoral responsibilities, things would be much different. This is no mandate for inquisitorial prying and meddling or for gratuitous invasion of other people's lives. Effective counselling has to be mutual; and it has to be conducted within a framework of meekness and respect. But there is no doubt that so far as the Bible is concerned every woman is her sister's keeper.

Thirdly, the minister cannot shirk his own counselling role. He is a pastor as well as a preacher. In one way or another he will learn about problems he has no right to pass on to others. He must deal with them himself. In fact, if he is as accessible to his people as he should be, they will make their way to him with their problems, as a matter of course: and they should be able to do so in absolute confidence.

All of which brings us back to the matter of training. In the last analysis, Christian counselling is neither an art nor a profession but a charisma: a spiritual gift. The Christian who engages in it relies mainly on three things: the teaching of scripture, the ministry of the Spirit and the Christian prudence acquired through his own experience. It is the application of these resources that gives what he does its distinctive character as Christian counselling. But this does not preclude training. All ministers need to be able to detect the symptoms of, for example, alcoholism and depression. All should be able to relate to disturbed people in one-to-one situations. And all should know when they are out of



## The Ministry Today

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their depth and need to call in specialist help. There is no point at which such training ceases. It is an ongoing thing and, once the foundation is laid, almost entirely a matter of self-help. Just as the minister will read every book on preaching so he will read whatever he can lay hands on relating to counselling. Why? Because he counsels as he preaches: in fear and trembling.

### **Leadership**

Besides being preacher and counsellor the minister is also a leader. He is not alone in this. The elders are also leaders. But so long as the minister is the only specifically trained, paid, full-time worker in the congregation the main responsibility will fall on him.

Leadership in this context means three things.

First, vision. Obviously, such a vision will have to be derived from the Bible, but each of us will have to work out what that means for his own situation. For oneself, it means a congregation which simultaneously reaches out to the wider community and is prepared to welcome all Christians simply on the basis that they are Christians. This demands that we transcend race and culture, disregard minor theological differences, major on the core doctrines of Christianity and practise the principle of Christian liberty in a way that allows God's people to be themselves. The practical test of such a congregation would be that every member could confidently take friends (converted and unconverted, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, black and white) along to the services.

Secondly, leadership involves expectations. We are bedevilled today by the wrong kind of Calvinism: one which accepts declining congregations as some inevitable consequence of predestination. Such expectations tend to be self-fulfilling. What of the great multitude which no man can number? What of the sustained New Testament emphasis

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21





## Priorities for the Church

on growth? What of the promise that God's word will not return to Him useless? What of the great pattern established in Acts: as men preached, God added to the church? These should be our attitudes. If we bring up our children in the knowledge of the Lord they will remain on His side; and if we nurture our congregations as we ought they will grow. If they don't grow, there is something wrong and we should be crying to God, 'Lord, how long?'

Thirdly, the leader is an enabler. He gets things done. How? Above all, by making sure that he doesn't try to do everything himself. The New Testament insists on body-ministry. Every member has a gift. Every member is baptised in the Spirit. Every member has a ministry. In fact the Body will function properly only if every component is working properly. Unfortunately, some members think they can't work. Others think they aren't allowed to work. Others don't want to work. And a few think they should do all the work. Get them all working! No one doing everything! No one doing nothing! Each making his own contribution, all teaching, all admonishing, all encouraging, all praying, all expectant. Some have precious personal skills as builders, businessmen, social workers, doctors or teachers. These are priceless resources. Use them! Consult them! Give them responsibility! Some are marvellous at bringing others to church, others marvellous at welcoming them. Thank God for them! And thank them, too! Some have heads full of ideas. Others are capable of endless hours of drudgery. Mobilise them, integrate them, use them, so that the whole body vibrates with life.

### **Problems?**

Finally, problems. What is the main problem facing ministers today? Almost certainly, discouragement. Much of this is circumstantial. It is not an easy day to be a minister. But



## The Ministry Today

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some of it, sadly, arises from within the church itself, frequently, indeed, from its very leadership. The minister is often under pressure to believe that his main gift, preaching, is no longer what the church needs. He must spend more time out and about! And then, when, as is inevitable, his preaching suffers, he is criticised for his preaching! There even seems to be a resentment in some quarters of preaching itself and a growing demand that it be replaced by some form of dialogue. There is no doubt that many earnest, talented and dedicated men are demoralised and dispirited. It is no fun having to face, every Sunday, instant postmortems of one's preaching; or to be in situations where, as one remarked to me recently, 'Whatever I do, it's wrong!' Few of these men are despots. Few regard themselves as above criticism. A word of encouragement might transform their ministry.

