

## Introduction

# The Pastor's Public Ministry<sup>1</sup>

What is the meaning of the traditional process by which ministers are ordained? For example, why do Presbyterians and Reformed churches require a long and painful process involving the care of session, care of presbytery, three years of theological education, internship, call, oral and written presbytery exams, and, finally, ordination? The Reformed churches have always emphasized the need for a “learned clergy,” but not as an end in itself. Why then must ministers be so carefully trained and so thoroughly examined? We can find no chapter and verse that says that it must be done this way. Indeed, some other traditions don't. Allow me to interpret our practice for us: the church is fulfilling its responsibility to “guard the gospel” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13-14). By limiting the public ministry of the church to those called, gifted, and prepared to do so, it is protecting the gospel from the theological errors of the untrained and the moral failures of the unexamined. It is especially the public ministry about which the church is concerned.

The public ministry has been carefully guarded by the church from the very beginning. Recall the foundational texts upon

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<sup>1</sup> What follows in the next fifty-four pages is considered at much greater depth in Johnson, *Worshipping with Calvin* and *Serving with Calvin*.

which is built our understanding of the offices of the church. Acts 6 records a dispute concerning the serving of meals to Hellenistic and Palestinian Jewish Christian widows. Men were chosen to perform this very public function. It was required that they be of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom (v.3), elected by the congregation (v.5), and set apart, or ordained, by prayer and the imposition of hands (v.6). This, mind you, was for the purpose of waiting on tables. Contemplate the meaning of this for future generations. The apostolic church was guarding the gospel by guarding its public ministry, limiting participation in it to proven men.

Is this not also the meaning of the long lists of character and conduct requirements found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1? Elders and deacons are to be men observed over a period of time sufficient to prove their character and demonstrate their knowledge and conduct. They must not be novices or recent converts. Elders must be “able to teach,” even “exhort in sound doctrine” and “refute those who contradict” it (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Likewise, deacons must be “full of wisdom,” which implies considerable knowledge of the Scriptures from which one gains wisdom. Holding a public office of the church requires the highest standards of knowledge, character and conduct. The New Testament in general and the Pastoral Epistles in particular repeatedly and emphatically require that we “guard what has been entrusted” to us (1 Tim. 5:20, 2 Tim. 1:14, 2:15, 3:14, 4:1-5, etc.). The church must not lay hands on anyone “hastily” (2 Tim. 5:22). The gospel is guarded by requiring of those who enter the church’s public offices a long period of observation followed by careful examination.

If this is true of the church’s “lay” leadership, what then can we say about those responsible for the ministry of the Word and sacraments? The distinction between elders who “rule well” and those who “labor at preaching and teaching,” is found in

1 Tim 5:17. The charge to “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching” is directly related to the command to “not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Tim. 4:13-14 *NASB*). From the beginning, the church has seen it as a matter of good order that even higher standards be required of those who regularly conduct public worship, preach and administer the sacraments than are required of other elders and deacons. The setting apart of a presbyter, a presiding elder, from among the presbyters, who was responsible for the ministry of the Word and Sacraments, yet was still subject to the presbyters as a whole can be found among the oldest extra-biblical documents, including those dating from the first and second centuries.<sup>2</sup> “The things which you have heard from me,” Paul tells Timothy, “these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

The long, careful, process of identifying, educating, examining, calling and ordaining ministers has as its goal ensuring that those who conduct public worship, administer the sacraments and preach are qualified and equipped to do so. Our age exerts enormous egalitarian pressure on the church. These pressures, in combination with the ministry of every member described in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, have worked to obscure the distinctive call of the minister. We shall say more about this later. Suffice it for now to say that Christ has given “pastors and teachers” to the church to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). The work of the “saints” depends upon the faithful labors of those with the word gifts, the pastors and teachers. Their work is public and official, that of the “laity” is private and informal. Ministers are called, trained, examined and ordained in particular to conduct the public ministry of

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2 T. M. Lindsey, *The Church and Its Ministry in the Early Centuries* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1903), 170ff.

the church. We repeat: the church, by requiring this, guards its gospel from the theological errors of the uninformed, and the moral lapses of the unexamined.

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## Leading in Worship<sup>1</sup>

The Reformation was not only a theological revolution, but also a liturgical revolution. One might accurately say it was a theological-driven liturgical revolution. It restored the worship forms of the patristic church, and, in doing so, revolutionized the preaching, praying, singing, Scripture reading, and sacramental practices of the medieval and renaissance church. Worship was ranked by Calvin and his successors in importance alongside the doctrine of justification by faith as vital and necessary reforms of the church.<sup>2</sup>

### FIRST PRIORITY

The most basic and essential task of the minister is that of leading public worship. Worship is also the highest priority of the church. A moment's reflection will confirm the accuracy of

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1 For a complete guide to leading worship services, see T. L. Johnson, *Leading in Worship* (1996; Durham, UK: EP Books, 2019), a handbook for ministers, with sections on regular services (Sunday morning and evening), occasional services (baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc.), seasonal services (Christmas, Easter, etc.), and historical examples (Calvin's "Form," Knox's "Form," the Westminster Assembly's "Directory," etc.).

2 As Calvin argued in his famous essay "On the Necessity of Reforming the Church," in *Selected Works of John Calvin*, Vol. 1. (1844, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1:226.

these statements. Worship is our first calling (Rom. 1:18ff) and our ultimate purpose (John 4:21ff; Rom. 11:33-36).<sup>3</sup> “Worship is the most high and honorable of all our works,” says the Puritan George Swinnock (1627–73).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it is primarily in the public services of worship that the means of grace are operative. Here, the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. As for prayer, though prayers may be offered in one’s closet (Matt. 6:1ff), let us not forget the special promise of Jesus concerning prayers offered where “two or three have gathered in My name,” likely a reference to organized public worship (Matt. 18:15-20). Of such prayers He says, “If two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it will be done for them by My Father who is in heaven.” There is a unique efficacy in the public prayers of the church.

This is not to depreciate the private or individual side of the ministry. Counseling and discipleship, administration and management, leadership training and fund raising all have their part. However, these tasks are secondary to and dependent upon the public services of the church. Only as the public ministry of the Word and Sacraments flourishes can there be a sufficient foundation for private ministries. Without it, there will be few to counsel or disciple, little to administer or manage, and few to train. The church’s assessment of a pastor’s ministry will primarily be based on his public preaching. That claim may seem a bit far-fetched and more than a bit unfair. Nevertheless, it is true. The pastor is who he is *as a preacher* to most of the congregation. Among contemporary writers, William H. Willimon puts it this way:

While we do not deny the importance of all the things we do,  
there is one role we must do and do well or we are in big trouble.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *Reformed Worship*, 23-29.

<sup>4</sup> George Swinnock, “The Incomparableness of God,” in *The Works of George Swinnock*, Vols. 1-5 (1868; Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), IV:503.

If our time and talent are not heavily invested in the tasks of preaching and worship leadership, our congregations are correct in assuming that we have lost the central focus of our ministry.<sup>5</sup>

We have found it necessary repeatedly to redirect the prayers of our morning men's prayer meeting so that participants would focus on the regular, ongoing public ministry of the church. For years, their prayers have been relatively exotic (Aunt Mabel's hiatal hernia) while neglecting prayer for the Sunday and Wednesday services into which we pour the bulk of our energies, time, and resources. We build and maintain buildings; we hire support staff, musicians, and ministers; we pay utility bills, print bulletins, and maintain a nursery all for the sake of what? The overwhelming amount of the church's time, energy, and resources is directly or indirectly related to the stated meetings of the church. Even the church's benevolence or missions budget is only possible because of the "success" or failure of the public services. The church's ability to raise the revenues necessary to support the church's work at home and abroad is directly dependent on the popularity and success (meaning these in their best sense) of its regular services of worship.

Given that these things are so, given that leading public worship is the minister's primary calling, this means that public worship is not only the most important but the most fruitful of all his activities. It is dismaying to observe the prevailing mindlessness of most of what passes for worship, with the exception of the sermon. Most of the ministers in evangelical circles seem to work hard at their sermons. Yet few, it appears, give much thought to anything else. There is usually little discernable logic, flow, or pace to the average service. Seldom does there seem to be much of a rationale for the hymn selection.

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<sup>5</sup> William H. Willimon, *Preaching and Leading Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 9.

Rarely can one discern any planning behind the content of the prayers, most ministers, one imagines, praying whatever happens to pop into their minds. Transitions between elements have the “and now, this!” quality found on television variety shows, where, in fact, there is no connection between what went before and what comes after. One is reminded of the Puritan complaint against the Anglican liturgy that it seemed to throw in this or that item “like tennis balls.” Things seem to be plugged in here and there without any apparent reason, other than to fill up the time slot. Elements seem to be dropped or added without regard for Scripture or tradition or logic.

The result is largely incoherent and unattractive worship services. It doesn't seem to matter if the services are “traditional” or “contemporary.” The former are often criticized for being boring, and with some justification. Indeed, they sometimes are dull, slow, and devoid of any obvious coherence. Likewise, the latter are often criticized for being shallow, aesthetically embarrassing (both for the quality of the music and the quality of the words), and intellectually dissatisfying. There is no lack of evidence that this judgment is largely justified as well. We see no future for the kind of worship that is now prevalent. The key to reform lies with the “clergy” and the kind of leadership that they will give to tomorrow's worship. How will tomorrow's ministers preach? How will they pray? How will they administer the sacraments and lead the church's public services? The answers we give affect the future health and fruitfulness of the church's ministry: No less is at stake.

## PRINCIPLES OF WORSHIP LEADERSHIP

Since worship is our ultimate priority and since public worship is the primary context where means of grace are operative, we therefore recommend the following seven principles.



## **Worship services**

First, lead public worship services that are *services of worship*. I was reared in churches in the Los Angeles area that were of the revivalistic tradition. Our worship services looked like evangelistic crusades, complete with first and last stanzas of numerous gospel songs, special music, little prayer or Scripture reading, an evangelistic sermon, altar call, and multiple verses of “Just As I Am.” My college years were spent at the University of Southern California, where I became involved in various campus ministries. Through their influence, the revivalistic format was supplanted by the contemporary, with gospel songs giving way to Scripture choruses, overtly evangelistic sermons to Bible studies, and altar calls to the “Four Spiritual Laws.” Upon graduation I traveled to England, embarking on a two-year study of theology at Trinity College, Bristol, an Anglican theological college. Daily chapel was required and, of course, we worshiped with the Prayer Book. I am embarrassed to say that for six months I hated it. When told that only 3 to 10 percent of the English population was in church on Sunday I thought, “And no wonder!” But then, one day, the thought came to me that had never occurred to me in my previous twenty-two years of church going. The constant use of the Prayer Book had finally made one huge overall impression: that *one goes to church in order to worship God*. I had understood that one goes to church to evangelize the lost; or to hear the Bible taught; or to enjoy the fellowship of the saints; or to enjoy the music. Church service as either revival, or lecture, or social gathering, or concert, or even as therapy had been my bias at one time or another. But as worship? This was a new thought. This is not to say that these other things do not occur in the context of worship. Evangelism, teaching, fellowship, singing all occur in the worship of the church. However, they are not *the* purpose for our gathering. Only worship can provide the ultimate rationale for our services.