

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php

Reformation
& Revival



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

Volume 6, Number 3 • Summer 1997

... the unity of the two Testaments does not require the uniformity of the two Testaments. Unity does not preclude diversity. The two Testaments may be unified just as certainly through discontinuity as through continuity. Both continuity and discontinuity are a part of the unity of the biblical revelation.

Paul D. Feinberg

The terms *continuity* and *discontinuity* actually exaggerate a contrast. Theologians who emphasize continuity between the OT and NT and between the successive periods within each Testament, as I do, also recognize elements of discontinuity. And dispensational theologians who emphasize discontinuity between the various dispensations and especially between Israel and the church also recognize basic continuities. . . . [I want to recognize] as clearly as possible the continuity running through Scripture while also noting the facets of discontinuity that mark the major contrasts between promise and fulfillment.

Fred H. Klooster

Servants, But Special Servants: Ministry Under the New Covenant

Thomas N. Smith

I once had a deacon in my church who always called me "Chief." From my first day on the job, his designation for me was always Chief. Now, I had been a pastor before and a preacher before I was a pastor, but I never had the experience of being called Chief. I enjoyed it. It touched something in me. It gave me such a sense of well-being and healthy self-esteem. I always looked forward toward phone calls and visits with my friend, and part of the reason lay in the fact that I could expect him to address me as his Chief.

One day, while the two of us were together, my friend indicated that he needed to check on something at home and asked me if we might drop by. When we pulled into the drive I noticed the local lawn-and-garden man working in the flower beds. When my friend got out of the car, the gardener spoke to him, and my friend and deacon replied, in a tone that could be heard all over the neighborhood, "How ya' doin', Chief?" I couldn't believe it! Indeed, I was certain for a moment that there must have been some mistake. I was my friend's *pastor*. I was my deacon's *leader*. I was the *Chief!* Only an embarrassed modesty kept me from inquiring of my deacon-friend about this breakdown in self-expression. Of course, I only had to be on the job for a few more weeks before I realized that my friend called everybody Chief.

I think it would be fair to say that I learned a few things from this experience. My understanding of myself, of social dynamics, and of language was profoundly extended by this. The fact is, and Jesus told us so in Matthew 23:7ff., we love to be called Chief. Second, some people increase their own popularity by addressing us like this. Third, language is devalued by such indiscriminate use. If everybody is the chief, then no one is.

We shall return to the issues of personal understanding

and social dynamics later. Let us consider the issue of word devaluation at this point. This is particularly pertinent in any discussion of “ministry” in the Christian church at the end of the twentieth century. This is so because the word “ministry” has come to be applied to every aspect of activity and action of Christians inside and outside the church. John N. Collins speaks to this contemporary ethos:

In their authentically modern way churches are increasingly speaking of a common call to ministry that does not depend on ordination: “for everybody”—to use the words of an Anglican Working Party on the theology of laity—“bishops, priests, and laity together, the great sacrament of our common calling is our baptism”; so that the churches then speak (to continue with phrases from the same Working Party) of “our churchly ministries . . . of both clergy and laity” (these extending to “those who cook, type, and clean”), of “our ministries with family, friends, or neighbors,” of “our ‘Monday morning’ ministries . . . within the structures of the secular worlds—political, industrial,” of “our ‘Saturday night’ ministries . . . in leisure and hospitality and entertainment and sports and holidays.” In speaking like this, they are speaking of ministry as a range of activities that some earlier Christians would instead have spoken of in their familiarly figurative way as the upbuilding of the body.¹

It is not surprising that the document Collins takes the quotations from has the title, *All Are Called: Towards a Theology of Laity*. While the document is Anglican, we would have to make only a few stylistic changes to have a representative view of ministry within the American evangelical churches of the past thirty years.

And what have those years produced? Stronger, healthier churches and Christians? A greater knowledge and reverent practice of the Scriptures? Profounder theological

interest among average Christians? More extensive ministry to the churched and unchurched at home and abroad? Greater sacrifice of time, talent, and financial resources to the work of Christ? All of this is to be doubted.

The fact is, when everyone is chief, no one is chief; when everything is ministry, the real ministry is debased and devalued; when everyone is an expert, real expertise (call it craftsmanship, or aptitude, or competence) languishes and mediocrity reigns. This is what has happened in the wake of the “Body Life” movements of the 1960s onwards. We have no theology of ministry—everything is considered ministry, and every “Cleatus” and “Junior” or “Chad” or “Sean” expect to be regarded as “ministers.”

In the New Testament a different atmosphere is encountered, one that modern purveyors of “every-man-ministry” might find chilly indeed! Ministers under the new covenant are “sent” (Rom. 10:15). They are “put into the ministry” by Christ Himself (1 Tim. 1:12). They are “entrusted with the gospel” by God (1 Cor. 9:17; Gal. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 1:11). They are entrusted with the gospel only when God tests them and finds them “approved” (1 Thess. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:15). These men feel themselves under a divine compulsion to fulfill their ministries (1 Cor. 9:16-17), and to urge others to do the same (Col. 4:17), even using the strongest possible language to drive this home (1 Cor. 9:16; 2 Tim. 4:1-2 with 5). This latter issue of account-giving is given considerable stress (1 Cor. 2:10-15; Heb. 13:17; James 3:1).

Now, it cannot be denied that the varied vocabulary for ministry and service in the New Testament covers a variety of services to Christ and His church (see, e.g., Acts 6:1ff.), but even here a distinction is made between “this task” (which is a serious and necessary one) and “the ministry of the Word” which is not given to everyone (v. 6). What must be denied, however, is that every service rendered by Christians within or without the Christian church qualifies

as “ministry” in the stricter sense, *as a responsible service entrusted by God to certain qualified and approved men to preach, teach and apply the Word of God to men and women inside and out of the Christian church with a view towards an accounting at the Day of Jesus Christ.*

In this more formal sense, the minister under the new covenant is a servant—a servant of the Lord, a servant of the Word, a servant of the church, and a servant of Christ.

Servants

The rich and variegated vocabulary used in the New Testament of ministry and ministers has one feature in common: those who represent God in the world are servants, that is, they are characterized by an attitude of subservience and respect to that or those they serve. Like the Lord Himself, they “did not come to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:35-45). They are not to be like the Gentiles who “lord it over them” (Luke 22:25). This Dominican saying of Jesus is taken up by the apostles in their instruction to the early churches (2 Cor. 1:24; 4:5; 1 Peter 5:3). Indeed, our Lord can say to the apostles, “So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done’” (Luke 17:10).

Christian ministers are characterized by ministry, *by service*. They are “your bond-servants for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5). They are “workers with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24). They are “servants through whom you believed” (1 Cor. 3:5). They are “God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor. 3:9). They are “servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

As such, they are men who know who and what they are. They are not dignitaries; they are not VIPs. They are servants, slaves, workers (in the early Bolshevik sense of the word), helpers and stewards. If they are special servants,

and they are, this is not because of personal worth or rank. Like Paul, they regard themselves as “the very least of all the saints,” “the least of all the apostles,” “the foremost” of all sinners, and “a nobody” (Eph. 3:8; 1 Cor. 15:9; 1 Tim. 1:15; 2 Cor. 12:11).

The grand example of their service is Jesus Himself who “did not come to be served, but to serve,” “taking the form of a bond-servant,” and as “the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet” (Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:7; John 13:14). Following this example, they are to “spend and be spent” in their Master’s work and on behalf of the people of God. Commenting on 2 Corinthians 4:5, Charles Hodge wrote, “Paul presented Christ as Lord; himself as a servant. A servant is one who labors, not for himself, but for another. Paul did not labor for himself, but for the Corinthians.”² This same attitude is evident in Paul’s description of Timothy: “But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:19-21). Paul’s and Timothy’s concern over the Philippian church was the same as that of the Lord Jesus Himself! The Servant-Lord was reflected and echoed in these servants of Christ! But note also from this Philippians passage that even in the days of the apostles, Paul characterizes the attitude and behavior of *most* of those carrying on ministry within the Christian church as unlike the servant conduct of Christ (Phil. 2:21)! Put simply and bluntly: We like being called “Chief.” Moreover, we positively *enjoy* the very things the Pharisees delighted in, and, too often, we succumb to the pressures of ambition and flattery to achieve them (Matt. 23:1-12). When this happens, we are not confronted with a small ethical “glitch,” but with a moral lapse that is tantamount to an outright denial of the

gospel (see 1 Cor. 1:18-31 and 3 John 9-11).

Servants of the Lord

The term “servant of the Lord” is fairly common in the Old Testament. It appears to have a technical intent when used of such persons as Moses (Josh. 1 passim.). In addition to this, the term “servant” in reference to God is used frequently from the time of Abraham on, i.e., “Your servant.” Paul is reflecting this old covenant usage when he describes himself in 2 Timothy 1:3 in these terms: “I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did. . . .” It is in this fertile soil of the Old Testament that the New Testament concept of “servant of the Lord” springs forth.

But perhaps the most intriguing material relating to this concept in the Old Testament is to be found in the so-called “Servant-Songs” of Isaiah 42-53. There the “Servant of Yahweh” is set forth as the representative of and sufferer on behalf of the nation of Israel. He is chosen, beloved, and called by the Lord (Isa. 42:1; 50:5). He is endowed with the Holy Spirit (Isa. 42:2). “Some suppose Him to be a prophet because of his peculiarly prophetic traits (ear, 50:4ff., and mouth 49:1ff.). . . .”³ The Servant of the Lord becomes the embodiment of God’s grace and justice to the nation and to the nations (Isa. 42:3-4), and messenger of salvation, a salvation which He Himself has wrought (Isa. 49:1-6; 52:13-53:12). There is little doubt how the early Christian church understood these songs (see Acts 4:27, 30; 8:30-35).

It is likely that this is the backdrop against which the life, ministry and death of Jesus are played out in the Gospels, especially the gospel of Mark. This is “the Servant of the Lord” who is among the disciples as One who serves and who “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45 with Isa. 53).

These special “servants of the Lord” culminating in the

“Servant” of Isaiah 42-53 give us some direction in understanding the New Testament’s use of the similar language to describe those who are “ministers of the new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6 with 6:4). Thus, while all the Lord’s people are His servants (1 Cor. 7:22), there are those who are called, equipped, and held accountable in a unique work as “the servant of the Lord” or “the servant of God” (see 2 Cor. 6:4 and 2 Tim. 2:24). John Flavel put the matter simply and succinctly three hundred years ago:

Every private person, who hath received any talent from God (and to be sure the meanest among us hath one talent at least) is a steward, and will be called to an account for the employment, or non-employment of that talent in the Audit-Day. But ministers are stewards in the strict and special sense. Christ distinguishes them from the others, as porters from the rest of the servants (Mark 13:34).⁴

This new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6) is given by God to the churches and to the world to effect His grace and justice (2 Cor. 2:14-17). It is given under His authority (Heb. 13:17), with His equipping (Eph. 4:11-12), and is finally answerable to Him only (1 Cor. 4:1-4 with 3:10-15). This is what makes it a fearful thing to carry out this work, to “fulfill” the ministry he has “received in the Lord” (Col. 4:17).

Servants of the Word

But such men are also “servants of the word” (Luke 1:2; Acts 6:4). There is some dispute as to the meaning of this phrase. It may refer to Christ Himself as “the Word,” though this seems foreign to Luke. It may refer to the word of God in the Scriptures, or “the Scriptures” (see 2 Tim. 3:15-4:2). It may be another term for “the gospel,” the word about Jesus Christ. In any case the content is the same; there is no disjunction between Christ, Scripture, and gospel in the mind-

set of the New Testament!

“Ministers of the word” are thus subject to that word! Just as they feel a divine compulsion to carry out their work (1 Cor. 9:16), they likewise feel a divine constraint to be faithful to the word committed to them. They are ambassadors and stewards with a solemn responsibility to the orders and commands of their Superior, and this Superior has committed to them His will in a sacred word-deposit. They are not to “be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord” (2 Tim. 1:8). They are to “guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in [them] the treasure which has been entrusted to [them]” (2 Tim. 1:14). Paul says, “For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved of God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God, who examines our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:3-4). And in the same way he speaks to the Corinthians in these words:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (2 Cor. 4:1-2).

Because of this awe which they feel before the ministry of the word, they can speak to the churches in these terms, “. . . for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God’s message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the Word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thess. 2:13).

It is this awesome reverence before and confidence in the Word that compels Paul to charge Timothy repeatedly and solemnly regarding his own responsibility to it (see 2

Tim. 2:15; 3:14-4:5). Failure to grasp this responsibility is at the heart of all the foolishness and “show-biz” evident in the churches of our day. Men appear intent upon being servants of everything and everyone but the Word of God. The reformation we pray and yearn for will come only if this perspective changes. Thus, this is what characterized the leaders of the Reformation of the sixteenth century: they were servants of the Word. We are all aware of Luther’s great words at Worms regarding the supremacy of the Word, but we may not be as familiar with the words of his younger French counterpart and fellow worker:

Let the pastors boldly dare all things *by the Word of God*, of which they are constituted administrators. Let them constrain all the power, glory, and excellence of the world to give place to and to obey the divine majesty of this Word. Let them enjoin everyone by it, from the highest to the lowest. Let them edify the body of Christ. Let them devastate Satan’s reign. Let them pasture the sheep, kill the wolves, instruct and exhort the rebellious. Let them bind and loose, thunder and lightning, if necessary, *but let them do all according to the Word of God!*⁵

The ministry of the new covenant is a ministry faithful to this Word (2 Cor. 2:14-6:10).

Servants of the Church

There is a very real fear in these ministers of the new covenant that they should become “slaves of men” (1 Cor. 7:23). They are aware of our Lord’s word in Matthew 6:24. Thus Paul can say, “If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10). That is to say, these men realized the dangers of working with men and women, of serving men and women. There is in all of us an inclination to control others; this is a part of our innate

depravity, and it is not eradicated in the Christian in this life. We are constantly confronted with the manipulative designs of this depraved tendency in ourselves and others. It must be resisted! Failure to resist the controlling designs of men is to fall prey to those designs, and when this happens one ceases to be the Lord's servant and free man.

But once this is appreciated, we are thereby freed to become "a slave of all" (1 Cor. 9:19). This is the paradox of Christian liberty: By becoming the Lord's slave, one thereby becomes capable of being the servant of all men. It is in this light that Paul could describe himself even to the Corinthians (who were far from being an "easy" people!) as "your bond-servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Out of this self-concept, Paul and his colleagues could practice a self-denying service to the Corinthians for the sake of the gospel. They could forego marriage (1 Cor. 9:5), eating and drinking (v. 4), and monetary support (vv. 6ff.). They could live as under the law or free from the law (vv. 19-21) and weak (v. 22). He could deny himself any privilege for the sake of the gospel in order that he might win all the more (vv. 19 and 23).

This is why we see him so willing to put up with the ingratitude and abuse heaped upon him by the Corinthians: he is their servant for Jesus' sake. This, too, is the reason behind his willingness to suffer so many things in his ministry of the gospel: he is the willing bond-slave of men for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor. 4:6-17; 2 Cor. 6:1-13; and chaps. 10-13). These sufferings which were the direct result of Paul's service to the many churches under his care, far from being despised by him, were considered as an aspect of the ongoing work of Christ, indeed, the ongoing sufferings of Christ (Col. 1:24-29). He gloried in them (2 Cor. 12:1-10)! Moreover, he urged others to endure them and model Christian behavior in the midst of them (2 Tim. 2:1-13; 2:24-26; 3:1-4:5).

And all this confronts those of us who talk about revival

and reformation in our day. The work of reformation in the churches is not a picnic. It is *work*: work that is labor, work that is painful, work that is despised and rejected by many as beneath their dignity, work that is frustrating and heart-breaking, work that is held in contempt by others, work that wears us out and shortens our lives, work that fills us with terror and crushes us with stress. Flavel quotes Luther in this vein: "The labors of the ministry will exhaust the very marrow from your bones, hasten old age and death."⁶ We must come to appreciate that real reformation is not to be found at conferences, nor in reading books, nor in listening to tapes or watching videos. Real reformation is in the work of serving others in the churches in the gospel. This warning is needed because we are in danger of developing a "conference culture" not unlike that of the "Victorious Christian Life" or prophecy cultures of decades ago. Such a thing is not only useless in promoting real reformation, it is a pernicious attack upon it. This is so because it produces elitism, promotes sloth, and cultivates spiritual pride. Such things are not viable in the day-by-day contact with real people in the ministry of the gospel. This conference culture I am criticizing does not have the marks of 1 Corinthians 4, or 2 Corinthians 6 and 12 upon it; it has more in common with a Caribbean cruise than with the work of reformation and the reality of revival. The real work is work *among* the people and *for* the people.

Servants of Christ

One of the most astonishing things to be found in the New Testament is Paul, the former Saul of Tarsus, calling Jesus, "the Christ." Or for emphasis, speaking of *Christ* Jesus. That Paul could recognize the crucified Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ is something that even astonished him (2 Cor. 5:13-21)! When Paul on several different occasions therefore designates himself as "a bond-servant of

Christ Jesus" (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10), and uses the same designation of other preachers and pastors (Col. 4:12), he is indicating a radical shift, not only in his own experience, but in the history of salvation. There are many ways that Paul indicates this shift in his writings, e.g., the "time" language of fulfillment (Rom. 16:25-27), the presentation of the coming of Jesus as a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17, etc.). And his use of the term "servant of Christ" is one of these.

The "servant of the Lord" has—by virtue of the fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers in Jesus of Nazareth—become the "servant of Christ." History has shifted, time has taken on a new and radical quality—the consummation of the ages has come! With the new creation has come a new covenant (2 Cor. 3), a new man, the church made up of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 4:1-16), which is both a ministry of the new covenant and of the new man—the new man "*in Christ!*"

With the new realities there has come another kind of shift, a theological and ethical one. The whole perspective has changed from one of expectation to one of realization. The gospel preached to the patriarchs (Gal. 3:8; Heb. 4:2) is now, manifestly, "the gospel of *Christ*." The law itself has become "the law of *Christ*" (Gal. 6:2; 2 Cor. 9:21). The very word of God now can be called "the word of *Christ*" (Rom. 10:17; Col. 3:16). Everything is now viewed from this new and radical and wonderful perspective! Trying to understand the Bible without understanding this new, radical, and wonderful perspective is like trying to understand American history without grasping 1492, 1776, or 1861-65!

And what does this mean? It means literally everything. It means that the focus of Christian theology and ethics is the fulfillment accomplished by Christ Jesus in His anointed roles as Prophet, Priest and King. It means that Christian proclamation has Christ as its "sum and substance." It means that Christian teaching is guided by His teaching and example. It means that Christian life is life related not

to experiences or rules, but to the Living Person of Christ who communicates with us through the Scriptures and validates that communication through His Holy Spirit. It means that Christian hope is not a morbid curiosity into things to come, but a steadfast and solid confidence in the One who has already entered the glory of God through His own death and resurrection, and who promises us that we shall do the same.

And a ministry that is Christian *must*, of necessity, keep these and other related truths before the people of God! A ministry that does not is not Christian at all! This is Paul's passion and goal in yet another of the many passages in which he discourses about Christian ministry: "And we proclaim *Him* [Christ, the hope of glory, v. 27], admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in *Christ*. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (Col. 1:28-29). We must remember this: It is Christ—in doctrine, content, practice, and spirit—who makes a ministry *Christian*.

Conclusion

It is my contention that there is a formal, commissioned, accountable ministry of the Word in the New Testament that is to be distinguished from other forms of Christian service (see, e.g., Romans 12:7; 16:1-2). Furthermore, I contend that this ministry is a special kind of service requiring not only the gifting of God but the training of men for this work. The loss of this point of view over the last thirty to forty years has not left the church in a stronger, healthier condition. It has, in fact, weakened and, in some cases, destroyed churches. What is needed in the new reformation that is now taking place is a recovery of this view of *the* ministry—ministry characterized by the apostolic marks which we have been considering.

But it needs also to be said that the *special nature* of this service lies also in self-denying, self-abasing, cross-embracing character. We who aspire to such a ministry are reaching for suffering, shame, indignity, weakness, humiliation—indeed, we are reaching for the very sufferings of Christ, the very weakness of Christ! Without these marks of suffering and weakness ours is not a Christian ministry, no matter what its content, orthodoxy, or historical precedents. At the great Day Christ will examine His ministers, not just for marks of orthodoxy, but for the marks of His cross!

And, while we love to be recognized, to be honored, to be protected, to be given honorable titles, we must regard all such things as inimical to our true position, not only as ministers, but as Christians. We might even paraphrase our Lord's words as follows: "You shall not be called 'Chief,' for you have one Chief and He is the Christ, and you are all brothers."

Author

Thomas N. Smith is pastor of Randolph Street Baptist Church in Charleston, West Virginia, and is associate editor of *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Endnotes

- 1 John N. Collins, *Diakonia, Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources* (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 258.
- 2 Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 464.
- 3 Colin Brown, gen. ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 3:609.
- 4 John Flavel, *Works* (London, 1701), 3:1328.
- 5 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), xii.
- 6 Flavel, op. cit., 1329.