

Biblical Church Ministry

There is dearth in modern churches; it is a dearth of Biblical ministry. Now many Reformed churches would generally agree with that statement but claim that their ministry is totally Biblical. My contention here is that even good Reformed preaching is not enough when compared to apostolic instruction about ministry. At its best, Reformed preaching is but one part of church service, and that done by one man. Paul taught that all members are involved in ministry and even the ministry of the word is much more than just an intellectual sermon.

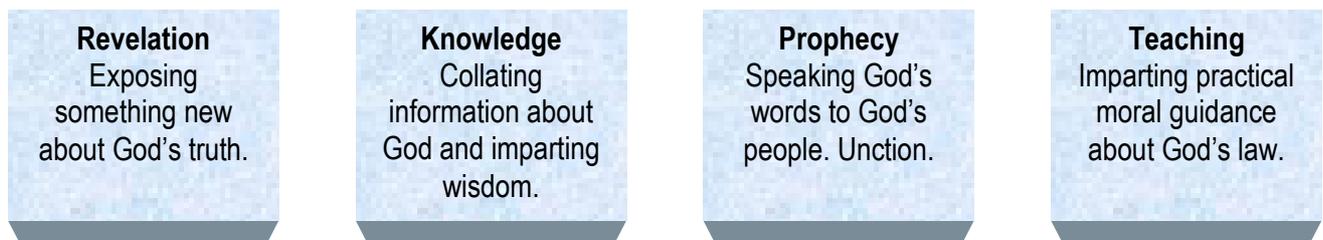
There are several sectors of ministry in the wider church: formal Biblical teaching, children's work, pastoral ministry, service to families the young and the old, catechismal instruction, corrective and disciplinary action etc; but in this paper I wish to focus upon the ministry of truth – expounding scripture and doctrine. It behoves us all to examine what the apostles said about ministry, especially expounding truth. In this paper I can merely scratch the surface of Biblical exegesis, but hope to direct attention to the broad scope of church ministry and urge a greater practice of it.

Paul's ministry

In 1 Cor 14:6 Paul tells us what he would wish to bring to churches to edify them; he lists the following:

1. REVELATION
2. KNOWLEDGE
3. PROPHECY
4. TEACHING

This fourfold emphasis equates to the following:



This fourfold emphasis is not just the province of apostles. Normal church ministry should always comprise something of each of these features in order to edify the Lord's people effectively. Churches that concentrate on only one will not be faithfully serving the flock. Preachers that focus upon intellectual development alone will do the flock very little good at all. Even Reformed theologians like R L Dabney have admitted that congregations only retain a very small percentage of sermons that they hear.

Let us examine these four aspects of ministering truth. They are really in two pairs; revelation and prophecy are related, while knowledge and teaching are two sides of the same coin.

REVELATION: exposing God's truth – *God's unveiling; our unmasking.*

'Revelation' is the Greek word *avpoka,luyij apokalupsis* (Strong's 602) meaning: to lay bare, to make naked, expose, disclose truth, reveal previously unknown things, make visible what was not seen. The emphasis here is on the apostle bringing new information, revealing God's truth not previously known.

Now all sermonical and catechismal instruction will impart new truth, previously unknown concepts, to the growing disciple; however, I believe that Paul implies something more than this here. Paul brought revelation of God in his words to mature believers and (as Peter admits) even stretched other apostles. Good ministry, even if explaining familiar truths, should bring the hearers a fresh revelation of God in Christ. Eyes are always opened by revelatory ministry, even if the doctrines covered are already understood. Revelation will not just bring a deeper, fresh understanding of God, but will also expose new things about us, and a new understanding of our duty.

Good ministry is not just preaching by the numbers, but exposes us and reveals God. Good ministry is revelatory.

- The word of the LORD was rare in those days; *there was* no widespread revelation. (1 Sam 3:1)
- Where *there is* no revelation, the people cast off restraint. (Prov 29:18)
- [Jesus will be] A light to *bring* revelation to the Gentiles. (Lk 2:32)
- [Paul prays] that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him. (Eph 1:17)

PROPHECY: speaking for God – *God's words.*

'Prophecy' is the Greek word *profhteia, a propheteia* (Strong's 4394). This means prophecy, a discourse arising from divine inspiration declaring God's purposes. This can involve reproving, admonishing, comforting or revealing. It may sometimes include foretelling (prediction) as well as the more frequent forthtelling.

Here we have to briefly enter the controversy about spiritual gifts. In short, the Charismatics make the mistake that they think they know what prophecy is, and that their versions of it are genuine. The character and fruit of what they do proves this to be false.¹ This we utterly condemn. However, in response to these errors, many sincere people have responded by saying that all supernatural gifts have ceased ('Cessationism'). The arguments put forward to prove this are unconvincing and require us to cut verses and parts of verses out of the Bible.² This position cannot be right. The position adopted here is that the Bible must be accepted as it stands. If there are no spiritual gifts in evidence, that is the Lord's prerogative. However, church history shows that in extreme conditions when

¹ For instance, even the supposed official prophets in the Charismatic Movement have repeatedly uttered false prophecies according to the Mosaic Law. They have foretold things that did not happen and they have prophesied things that have led people astray after errors. Under this law they are worthy of death (Deut 13:1ff, 18:20ff). Apart from this, most prophecies in this movement are banal, superficial, passionate and clearly emanate from over-excited flesh at best.

² We cannot document this fully here. Suffice to say that most cessationist arguments are based upon history and this cannot overturn scripture; but in fact the historical facts do not help the cessationist position anyway. The key text used (1 Cor 13:10) is an exegetical fallacy. It clearly points to the end of this dispensation, the coming of the Lord (see v12) not the termination of gifts with coming of the Bible (which continued after 90 AD anyway according to the church fathers).

such gifts are needed, the Lord supplies them.³ The prime occasion was in the formation of the early church before a complete Bible was compiled and published. However, it should be noted that this condition continued until the Reformation, with the publication of widespread vernacular translations and the invention of movable-type printing.

If we ignore the controversial aspects of prophecy (prescience, prediction) it is clear that prophetic ministry does not require inspiration of scripture. Church prophecy is not new revelation of scripture, but direct encouragement based upon scripture (1 Cor 14:3). Prophetic ministry in the New Testament does not always result in the formation of scripture; anyone can prophesy (1 Cor 14:1, 5, 24, 31) but only apostles, or via their secretaries, could write scripture. Multiple prophets ministered in the early church, but we do not know most of their names, let alone have any of their words in the New Testament. Agabus was a true prophet but there is no letter of Agabus. Philip had four daughters who prophesied but they did not contribute to scripture (Acts 21:8-9). Antioch had various prophets (Acts 13:1) but we only know of Paul and Barnabus, and even Barnabus did not write scripture; we know nothing of Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene and Manaen.⁴

The Puritan view of prophecy is helpful here. They believed that godly preaching, preaching with spiritual power, was prophesying; and in this they are right. William Perkins says, *‘Every prophet is partly the voice of God: to wit, in preaching’*,⁵ Genuine preaching of the word ought to be the voice of God speaking to the people. In this he agreed with John Calvin,

*‘Prophecy at this day in the Christian Church is hardly anything else than the right understanding of Scripture, and the peculiar faculty of explaining it, in as much as all the ancient prophecies and all the oracles of God have been completed in Christ and his gospel.’*⁶

*‘The Lord raised up the other three [apostles, prophets and evangelists] at the beginning of his kingdom, and still occasionally raises them up when the necessity of the time requires.’*⁷

This idea also appeared in formal documents such as Bullinger’s Second Helvetic Confession, *‘PROPHETS. In former times the prophets were seers, knowing the future; but they also interpreted the Scriptures. Such men are also found still today.’*⁸ Some great Puritans, such as William Bridge or John Owen not only accepted the ministry of prophets as preachers, but also believed that in extraordinary times the supernatural aspect of that ministry could also be manifest.⁹ The Covenanting preacher Alexander Peden is a clear example of this.¹⁰

Here we must leave this vexing argument and concentrate on the matter in hand.

New Testament prophecy includes the following:

- Revelation (1 Cor 14:30)

³ For instance in the killing times of the Scottish Covenanters. See *The Works of George Gillespie*, vol. 2, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), p30.

⁴ For more information on this matter see my paper, *New Revelation*.

⁵ William Perkins, ‘The Art of Prophesying’, *The Work of William Perkins*, The Sutton Courtenay Press (1969), p333.

⁶ *Commentary on Romans*, 460, cf. 269.

⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, iii, 4.

⁸ *Second Helvetic Confession*, section on church ministry.

⁹ *The Works of John Owen*, Banner of Truth, (1967), vol. 3, p. 451, p.475; vol. 4, p467. *The Works of William Bridge*, Vol 1,p417-418.

¹⁰ See *The Scots Worthies*.

- Knowledge (1 Cor 14:31; ‘learn’)
 - Encouragement (1 Cor 14:31)
 - Edification (1 Cor 14:3)
 - Exhortation (1 Cor 14:3)
 - Comfort (1 Cor 14:3)
 - Admonition (Ps 81:8; Jer 42:18-19; Zech 3:6)
 - Condemnation (Acts 5:1-11)
- Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, *let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy* in proportion to our faith. (Rm 12:6)
 - [The Holy Spirit gives to the church] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy. (1 Cor 12:10)
 - Pursue love, and desire spiritual *gifts*, but especially that you may prophesy ... he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men ... He who prophesies edifies the church. I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies *is* greater than he who speaks with tongues. (1 Cor 14:1-5)
 - For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. (1 Cor 14:31)
 - Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. (1 Cor 14:39)
 - Do not despise prophecies. (1 Thess 5:20)

KNOWLEDGE: speaking about God – *God’s themes, God’s wisdom.*

The Greek word for ‘knowledge’ here is *gnw/sij gnosis*, (Strong’s 1108). It means general intelligence, possession of information, understanding, more advanced knowledge, moral wisdom.

One of the problems experienced by many in the church is that they fall into problems because they never see the wood for the trees in understanding Biblical truth. People can claim to be assiduous and evangelical in Biblical study and yet fail to be evangelical in cardinal Biblical doctrines. They study daily but fail to grow in understanding. They could describe details about a leaf but be clueless as to where they were in the wood. The latter is more important if you are lost.

Knowledge is the sister to doctrinal teaching; both are necessary. We will examine doctrine in a moment but here I wish to emphasise the importance of moral wisdom and an overall grasp of God’s truth.

Truth is practical. The Bible is not a book to be studied for an exam but to be followed in order to live right. There are key themes that are necessary to understand, both in order to get a strategic grasp of the Bible and to get a sound foundation in one’s life. Christians need divine knowledge. To be wise they need to know God; to know God they need Biblical knowledge.

Genuine ministry will determine to bring a strategic understanding of Biblical truth and the knowledge of God. It won’t be satisfied with an inspiring word or blessed thoughts each week, but will desire to see growth in the congregation of digested truth and growing practical wisdom through gaining knowledge.

This will involve assessing the needs of the flock and giving them what they need, even if it is not what they want. The aim of godly ministry will be to bring the flock into more and

more understanding so that they are wise. Wise both about the contents of the Bible and how to apply it in everyday life.

It is not enough to give a rousing sermon; what is crucial is that people grow in understanding, both of the Bible and of God, so that they are morally wise.

- [Solomon praying] give me wisdom and knowledge. (2 Chron 1:10)
- All the Levites who taught the good knowledge of the LORD. (2 Chron 30:22)
- Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe your commandments. (Ps 119:66)
- The fear of the LORD *is* the beginning of knowledge, *but* fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:7)
- Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom; from His mouth *come* knowledge and understanding. (Prov 2:5-6)
- And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment. (Phil 1:9)
- [Paul prays] that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:10)

TEACHING: explaining about God – *God's arguments.*

‘Teaching’ is the Greek word *didach*, *didache* (Strong’s 1322) meaning: teaching, what is taught, doctrine, instruction. Perhaps a key emphasis of this word is doctrinal instruction for moral guidance rather than mere intellectual development.

Understanding Bible facts is merely the first stage of godly learning. Having a deep knowledge of God’s themes must go hand-in-hand with doctrinal understanding. It is crucial to develop a Biblical theology in order to understand God. This is merely the systematising of what the Bible says around certain subject heads to get a balanced understanding of what scripture teaches us about God, salvation, sin, the future and so on.

This is not an optional matter; anyone who wants to know God and seeks to live a holy life needs to understand God’s arguments laid down in scripture. This requires sound teaching to extract these arguments and lay them down in a systematic way so that errors are ironed out and truth established. It is rightly dividing truth from scripture; i.e. cutting a straight path, establishing a correct course, through the Bible to provide a foundation of sound doctrine. This aspect of ministry is extremely important. Disciples without sound teachers remain babes.

Biblical knowledge can remain clinical and lifeless in people. They could win a Bible trivia quiz but be unable to live a godly life. Doctrinal understanding is utterly vital in order to live righteously and to avoid deception. Bible knowledge must become doctrinal.

- If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine. (Jn 7:17)
- They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine. (Acts 2:42)
- You obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. (Rm 6:17)
- Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. ... Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. (1 Tim 4:13, 16)
- Speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1)

A normal church meeting is based on *koinonia*.¹¹

Note what Paul mentions as occurring in a normal church meeting in terms of ministry

- Various people praying (1 Cor 14:16)
- People singing (1 Cor 14:15)
- Various songs, tongues, revelations, interpretations (1 Cor 14:26)
- Two or three people speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14:27)
- Two or three people interpreting tongues (1 Cor 14:27)
- Two or three people prophesying (1 Cor 14:27)

NB – no mention of one-man ministry or a sermon.

At the very least we are talking about a dozen people expressing some sort of ministry in any normal church meeting. It is impossible to hold any other view than multiple ministry in the gathered church unless you rip 1 Cor 12-14 out of the scriptures. [Even so some leaders try to effectively do this by foolishly saying that 1 Cor 14 is expressing the disorder in Corinth; an interpretation impossible to maintain under any stretch of the imagination.]

Paul's emphasis on multiple ministry is entirely in keeping with his earlier teaching in 1 Cor 12 about the body comprising of many members and each member having a specific gift and using it for the good of the body. Every Christian should read this chapter thoroughly and regularly until it begins to rub off in genuine body ministry. Paul knew nothing but mutual edification, shared ministry, and corporate encouragement as the foundation of church service.

It is impossible to have a Biblical view of church ministry without emphasising the need for every member to participate fully and freely.

Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version*
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¹¹ This is the Greek word for fellowship, communion, sharing, giving and taking.