

On Holy Ground

This introduction sets the basis to the material which follows, entitled ‘Ministers of the Word and Sacraments’. The whole topic is most important and will demand our disciplined hearing. The topic’s importance, however, is not that we think it is important but that our God says it is and he treats himself, and therefore his people, with great seriousness.

For instance, Psalm 96 begins with a call to ‘Sing to the LORD a new song’ and we may recall the first verses of Psalm 40:1-3

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he inclined to me and heard my cry.
²He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
³He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.

The ‘new song’ is not some recent composition; it is a great cry of delighted, no doubt exhausted, worship because of all that the LORD has done for us. The result will be that ‘many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Then Psalm 96:9 calls on the people to ‘Worship the LORD in holy splendour (‘in the beauty of holiness’), to *tremble* before him all the earth.’

In Acts 19:6-7, the former disciples of John the Baptist, as with Cornelius and his household in Acts 10, and the new community in Acts 2, received the Holy Spirit, spoke in tongues and prophesied. There was ‘Tongues’ and worship: ‘Prophecy’ and ‘the Word’. I take it that the gift of ‘tongues’ or ‘languages’ refers to deep, otherwise unspeakable, worship (So in Acts 2:11 the new believers had to tell out ‘the mighty works of God’). Of course, both can easily be counterfeited; ‘even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light’ (2 Cor. 11:14).

Note that this worship and prophecy was not to bring us to some ‘spiritual high’:

1 Cor. 14:39 ‘Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues’.

So here are a few questions for us, but even though they are publically asked, they need not be answered publically.

Question 1. Have you received the gift of tongues?

Question 2. If not, then what gift or gifts *do* you have? After all, we are all part of the body of Christ:

1 Cor. 12:27 ‘Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.
28 God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

- 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?
 30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

Note that Paul's answer to his own questions is emphatically 'No'.

Question 3. Are we willing to ask for and willing to receive whatever gifts God may intend for us as members of the body of Christ?

Question 4. Have we reduced our gatherings to 'religious entertainment' rather than church 'services', i.e. opportunities where we 'serve'? Or are our gatherings determined by our preferences. I am by no means implying that there should be no enjoyment in church meetings. The fruit of the Spirit is 'love, joy, peace etc.' and that is nothing less than the joy of Jesus himself. Surely we should know wonderful living joy together and not some painful, deadly, joy. In fact, Nehemiah and Ezra told the people:

"This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for *the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (Neh. 8:9-10).

In the same way:

There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance

And note that it not only the angels who rejoice; it is *joy in their presence*'. Can we not participate in the joy of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And so in the Father's utter delight when a prodigal returns:

We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found (Luke 15:7, 10, 32).

Question 5. Does the answer to Question 1 lie in the area of our will ? 1 Cor. 14:37 demonstrates that it is submission to the apostolic command from the Lord himself!

1 Cor. 14:20-25

²⁰Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.

²¹In the law it is written,

"By people of strange tongues
and by the lips of foreigners

I will speak to this people;

yet even then they will not listen to me,"

says the Lord. (= Isa 28:11-12)

²²Tongues, then, are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers (in the congregation), while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers (in the congregation. (That is, 1 Cor. 14:37. Do we submit the apostolic authority, since it is through the apostles that we receive the Spirit?)

²³If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

²⁴But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all.

²⁵After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, "*God is really among you.*"

Question 6. Does verse 25 describe our gatherings? Cf. Exodus 3:5 – Moses was instructed ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’. It was not special sanctified dirt, but the great moment of a personal encounter with the living God.

Or, see the warnings in Isa. 6:1-5 against uncleanness amongst those who dare to enter his holy presence:

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

²were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

³And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

⁵And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Num. 10:1-3 is a stinging reminder of God’s attitude towards unholiness among the priests of those whom God has declared to be ‘a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6):

¹Now Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his censer, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them.

²And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

³Then Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the LORD meant when he said,

‘Through those who are near me
I will show myself holy,
and before all the people
I will be glorified.’

And Aaron was silent.

The contrast is stark: as in Ex. 34:29-30.

Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone *because he had been talking with God*.

³⁰When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him.

1 Cor. 3:16-17 speaks of the members of the church:

Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?

¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.

See also 2 Cor. 3:7-18

⁷Now if the ministry of death, chiselled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, ⁸how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory?

⁹For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory!

¹⁰Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory;

¹¹for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

¹²Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness,

¹³not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside.

¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside.

¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds;

¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.

¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

The contrast with our deadly past is wondrously delineated in Ephesians 2:4-6:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — ⁶and raised us up with him and *seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*

Though there is far more that can be said, one final matter should be raised here: Gen. 2:1-3 describes the climax of the ‘days’ of creation:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude.

²on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done.

³So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it (i.e. declared it to *be* holy), because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.

The whole creation was a garden, God’s temple in which he took delight. It was ‘*very good!*’ What is more, Adam, his appointed high priest, was to ‘till and keep it’, words used elsewhere of the work of the Levites in Israel. Such were the first heavens and earth, telling out the glory of God (see Ps. 19:1-6).

Then Rev. 21:1-3 shows us the climax of the plan and action of God:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.

²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among human beings.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them.

The first ‘Man’, Adam, desecrated the temple of God, but the last Adam, the second Man has removed all traces of the first desecrated and fouled creation. The joy of *being* a chosen race, holy nation and royal priesthood has been restored (see 1 Peter 2:4-5). Our function as a holy nation has been established and our eternal priesthood established by our Great High Priest who has, on our behalf, gone into the inner shrine behind the curtain, has taken us with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places. Our gatherings as the church are not, therefore, to be either places of harsh legalism nor of ugly self-indulgence. Because ‘God himself will be with us’, ‘God is really among us’.

Ministers of the Word and Sacraments

Give grace, O heavenly Father, to all Bishops and Curates, that they may both by their life and doctrine set forth thy true and lively Word, and rightly and duly administer thy holy Sacraments. And to all thy people give thy heavenly grace; and especially to this congregation here present; that, with meek heart and due reverence, they may hear, and receive thy holy Word; truly serving thee in holiness and righteousness all the days of their life.

(1662 BCP: The prayer ‘for the whole state of Christ’s Church militant here on earth.’)

INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘Ministers of the Word and Sacraments’ is jargon, but when taken seriously the phrase is highly significant. At the same time, in common use it does seem a bit strained, as ‘Ministers of the Word’ often, even usually, in evangelical circles, is taken to mean preaching or Bible teaching, while in some places ‘Sacraments’ are neither understood biblically nor, apparently, practiced as often as previously. Examples of this latter point may include the separation of baptism from the whole gathering of the local congregation. This reduces the activity to more of a naming rite. It was intended to be a declaration that a person was now a Christian, as evidenced by he or she taking a ‘Christian’ name. Then the Lord’s Supper is sometimes treated as a ‘mere memorial’ of the Death of Jesus, rather than an expression of ‘Holy Communion’. In spite of the language used or prescribed, it is not treated as a participation in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Nor, it seems, is it often expounded as a communion among the believers. We will discuss the sacraments more fully later, but for now it should be stressed that none of these comments, negative as they may appear, is intended to call into question the faith of the men and women involved, nor are they prescribing what method a local church or denomination should use.

Another feature of the phrase ‘Ministers of the Word and Sacraments’ is that it is mostly limited to the ‘ordained’ ministry, while the unordained ‘laity’ are there to be passive recipients or, at least to act under the direction of those who ‘know’. That may not always be a problem, and may be unavoidable, given the diversity within congregations and the need for human leadership, but it can become embedded in our global or local traditions and so disguise the true nature of the church.

These issues are not new. A study of Church History will show us the battles which, over the centuries, took place in order to preserve what is true to the scriptures. Sometimes it cost the lives of the protagonists. There were times of great upheaval, such as during what is known as ‘The Reformation’ of the 1500s. There were other times when those who claimed to be the heirs of the Reformation sullied it’s name by their pedantry and petty arguments. And there are still those who are divisive by their constantly wanting to re-fight the old battles, in spite of the fact that the previous points of conflict are no longer so significant. Of course points of disagreement still exist and should be discussed but, as ministers of the Word and Sacraments, it is incumbent upon us to see that in the 21st century the battle is not about old doctrines, even if they are true but, on the human level, about the survival of the church. Trivialising our circumstances either by

falling back on past jargon or by being bone-headed will simply not do. There are greater matters at stake.

In 1620 the Pilgrim Fathers sailed for America aboard the Mayflower. These men, along with their families, had great hopes of finding/founding a society where there would be liberty for them to follow the Lord in the things that had been revealed to their hearts and understanding. A man by the name of John Robinson (who himself stayed behind) sent the departing company on their pilgrim voyage with these earnest words:

*'I charge you before God...that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any other instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which...will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God had revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented...'*¹

We are not to be so open minded that our minds can be filled with all sorts of contemporary rubbish, but always we must be those who test all things by the Word of God and so live and minister in the world – and to the world – in which God has placed us. Just what that means must now occupy us.

THE QUESTION²

How can human beings dare claim that they minister the divine Word? This is not the place to indulge in particular criticisms of others, especially since we are all prone to mixed motives and remain 'a sinner still'. But I think that first we must eliminate from the answer those who claim to do so because they are ministers of the Word while they are, either openly or privately, focussed on money or power. There are sufficient warnings in the scriptures to make us shun that sort of human 'ministry'. We ought also call into serious question 'ministries' which manipulate men and women by bribery or guilt.

However, the claim to be a minister of the Word is a serious claim and ought be taken seriously by all who make it. But there is more than merely our occupations or, to use a better word, our 'vocations' to be considered. The question about making the claim to be ministers of the divine Word actually opens up to us a whole new dimension, not just to church life, with its multitude of activities, many or perhaps most of which are good in themselves, but to the whole of reality.

THE WORD OF GOD

An aspect of the subject that greatly concerned Karl Barth (1886 – 1968) but has not always received adequate attention relates to the meaning of the phrase 'Word of God.' Some take it that the words simply refer to the Bible. In some sense ministry of God's Word will be for them a biblical ministry. Others think in terms of preaching or

¹From http://www.newtestamentpattern.net/christian-articles/sundry-thoughts/the-words-of-john-robinson_mayflower/, downloaded 8/10/16, emphasis added.

²In what follows, I am indebted to an article by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1915-2009), 'The Ministry of the Word of God', in Christian D. Kettler and Todd H. Speidell (Eds), *Incarnational Ministry: The Presence of Christ in Church, Society and Family, (Essays in Honor of Ray. S. Anderson)*, Helmers and Howard, Colorado Springs, 1990, pp. 79-97. I will at times use Bromiley's words and at others will follow the outline he provided. At no point do I claim that the words or thoughts of this article are entirely my own.

of proclamation in its various forms. As they see it the words and works of Christian preachers, teachers, counsellors and witnesses are the Word of God. Others prefer a more generous but also more vague definition and equate the Word of God with the gospel. Simply ministering the gospel is ministering God's Word.

The Reformers, who spoke much of God's Word, also used the term in many different ways. Some describe the Word of God as the ministry of the gospel for forgiveness, conversion, establishment, comfort and admonition. Others relate the ministry of the Word to the gospel through which we 'enjoy Christ'. Again others view the Word of God as 'the pure doctrine of the gospel' that is preached in true churches. The Reformers, then, identify the Word of God with the gospel and its proclamation by preaching and teaching. They recognize that the proclamation took at first a spoken form. They are keenly aware that Jesus himself never gave the Word written form and that he sent out his disciples to preach. One confession says already that scripture is the written Word of God embodying all that belongs to the true knowledge, love and glory of God. Some referred to the committing of God's Word to writing in the books of scripture, the 'written Word' of God.' The Anglican Articles reject rulings that are 'contrary to God's Word written', 'repugnant to the Word of God' and 'repugnant to the plain words of scripture'. And so the various reformed groups go on.

Reverting to the question of Karl Barth, we note that his acceptance of the role of scripture, and his attempt to work out a biblical dogmatics for the guidance and correction of Christian proclamation rests on the perception that God's Word is both the living Word and the written Word of scripture. It is not enough to go out to the world claiming to have a message from God. It is not enough to pass on a supposed divine message that has simply been picked up in church services, Sunday school classes, Bible studies, or theological lectures, and it is not enough to pass on the platitudes, to fling out the challenges, to communicate the innovative insights that often pass as the ministerial currency. If Christian ministers are doing their real job, they can do it only as authentic ministers of God's Word. If they cannot claim to be this, they have no business in the Christian ministry at all. But to make the claim, they need a standard by which to tell whether their proclamation goes out to the world with any credibility to themselves and others – as God's Word. As Barth sees it, and the Reformers before, that standard is holy scripture.

More narrowly then, Barth's disquieting question is whether his own proclamation and that of his church and age can stand by this criterion. Do we know, indeed, what the written Word of God is saying, what it is all about? If not, how can we with any honesty present to our people and the world as ministers of the Word of God? And even if we do, are we truly conforming our ministry to this normative ministry, so that in fact, and not merely in word, it is the ministry of God's Word.

But there is more to it than that, for scripture shows us that as well as the Word proclaimed and the Word written there is also and primarily the Word incarnate. Here is an aspect of the ministry of the Word of God that has seldom commanded the direct notice it clearly merits. Even the Reformers do little to relate the ministry of the Word in any immediate way to the incarnate Word. For them Christ is the center of scripture and the basic theme of Christian proclamation. Not until we come to the 1930s and to Barth's exploration of the doctrine of the Word in his concern for the ministry of the Word do we find a comprehensive treatment that does full justice to the Word revealed or incarnate, relating it to the Word written and the Word proclaimed in triune perichoresis.

Yet little enough has been done to follow up this presentation in either the doctrine or the practice of ministry. True, the general implication that Christian ministry is Christ's ministry would hardly provoke dissent, and most ministers have some sense at least of some of the ramifications. What has not been so obviously grasped is that Christ's ministry is itself the ministry of the Word of God and that the ministry of the written Word and the proclaimed Word must be integrated into this primary ministry, first as that of the inspired and normative prophetic and apostolic witness, then, the ongoing, living testimony which the church must give in every age and place in the power of the Spirit.

THE MINISTRY OF THE INCARNATE WORD

In asking the question concerning the ministry of the Word, we often forget the threefold nature of the Word and its ministry and rush on too hastily to our own role as ministers of the Word of God, and the problems associated with that role. We thus overlook the more important fact that primarily and properly the ministry is the Word's own ministry. This is pre-eminently true in the case of the incarnate Word. Christ the Word came into the world to minister. He 'came not to be served, but to serve' (Mt. 20:28). He was among us 'as one who serves' (Lk. 22:27). He gave his disciples a striking illustration of even menial service (Jn. 13:3ff.). He had, of course, his own specific ministry during his earthly years from Bethlehem to Golgotha and Olivet. But Christ also continues his ministry through his disciples and his presence in and through the Holy Spirit. It is *his* Word that they speak, *his* acts that they do, and in *his* name that they minister. *Their* ministry is *his* ministry.

Calvin says that Christ's anointing was not merely for his teaching but for the ongoing ministry of his body, and others recognise the same principle. Barth, of course, follows up the general theme of Christ's continuing ministry in his account of the prophetic Christ as the true witness.

Even today, however, the church and its ministers have been slow to appreciate the implications of this in spite of some promising ventures. How many debates about Christian ministry begin openly with the truth that is no doubt ultimately presupposed: namely, that no church at all has an autonomous ministry of God's Word, that all that any church can do is participate in the ministry of Christ the incarnate Word? What would it do for intercommunion and unity if the churches and their theologians, workers, and members gave precedence to the fact that for all the denominational differences and their relative seriousness, the ministry of Christ alone confers authenticity on all ministry and gives it the only authentication that finally counts? What would be the ramifications in planning, strategy, technique, training, and evaluation if more thoughtful attention were paid to the reality that first and foremost the ministry is the Word's and not ours? Only secondarily and derivatively can we be ministers of the Word of God. Primarily and properly the incarnate Word is his own minister.

This means, of course, that the ultimate commissioning for ministry is his. The churches rightly ordain and institute and commission. Biblical models exist for this (Acts 13:2f.; 1 Tim. 4:14). The churches also recognize, however, that human appointment derives its authenticity only from divine appointment. The incarnate Word instituted ministry by calling disciples as God had previously called Moses and the prophets. Nor was this only a once-for-all appointment. An inner call as well as outer appointment is still required of ministers of God's Word. Christ himself is the

church's true head and pastor, and he gives the church pastors and teachers who preach the Word at his command. One might refer this of course, to the original institution, but clearly a minister of God's Word must not 'intrude himself by indecent means but is bound to wait till it shall please God to call him'. Ordination services refer regularly to an inner as well as an outer call.

The divine commissioning lies behind the validity of ministrations by unworthy ministers inasmuch as they act in God's name and 'minister by his authority'. Yet if Christ's commission gives welcome reassurance, it also raises questions and challenges. The ministry as such has divine authorization, but do ministers really have their own call and commission? Do these ministers or any Christians performing acts of ministry, really display a sense of commission by acting under the orders of the Word and showing in both word and deed that their ministry is his? Do they say what he wants them to say and do what he wants them to do? Again, have the churches the wisdom to see that many whom they do not officially ordain, or who do not fit into ordinary patterns of ministry, may still have Christ's commission and may thus participate legitimately in the common ministry? Is it sufficiently appreciated that the ministry of Christ the Head implies the ministry of the whole body, the taking up of all believers in different ways and according to their different gifts, into the ministry of the incarnate Word? Much of the laxity, the self-will, the indolence, the arbitrariness, the contentiousness, the misplaced activity and the ultimate futility of Christian ministry might be obviated were it more clearly understood that all our ministry rests on commissioning by the Word into the Word's own ministry.

The authority and power of ministry also rest on the fact that it is primarily the ministry of the Word himself. The Reformers note this especially in connection with the power of 'the keys', which they relate not merely to penance but to the total gospel of remission and renewal. The Augsburg Confession (1530) takes the lead by saying of absolution: 'It is God's voice and pronounced by his command'. The First Helvetic Confession equates power of the keys with the authority to 'preach the Word of God and feed the Lord's flock'. No individual or group has independent authority to pronounce forgiveness or even to accuse of sin and bring under judgment. Christians often like to think they have power to do both. Condemnations and easy assurances fly from pulpits. Delegated authority comes to be viewed as intrinsic authority. The claim to be Christ's vicars, having the right to act in his stead, supposedly provides vindication. It may well do so, but only if the delegation is taken seriously. For judgment and pardon belong to God and his Christ. Authority to pronounce either the one or the other derives from Christ alone.

Similarly it is to Christ's ministry by the Holy Spirit that converting and renewing power belongs. The Reformers stress this point. In the famous words of the Augsburg Confession, the Spirit 'worketh faith, where and when it pleaseth God in those who hear the gospel.' Faith is a free gift of God. 'We are enlightened in faith by the secret power of the Holy Spirit.' The Spirit 'brings us in all verity by his own operation'. Christ 'illuminates inwardly by giving the Holy Spirit'. If God works outwardly through ministers, inwardly he persuades the hearts of his elect unto belief by his Holy Spirit. Christians may press others with cogent arguments, move them by eloquent addresses, clever techniques, influence them by efficient organization, capturing by attractive personality, but they cannot alone do the one thing that finally counts, i.e. give the inner enlightenment and bring about the inner conversion that means eternal salvation. God uses their ministry as a means to his end, but the power

of Christian evangelism and edification is the power of the Word's own ministry by the Spirit and in high high-priestly intercession.

A question also arises concerning the authority of the churches to establish doctrines and practices. This issue called forth some of the words of the Reformers as they opposed the specific dogmatic and pastoral requirements of the medieval church and papacy, resisted imposition of Roman control over the national churches, disputed the rights of popes to depose rulers and dispose of kingdoms, and questioned the absolute authority of councils. Primarily the Reformers were subjecting the church's authority to the written Word, granting it no power to ordain anything contrary to scripture, and allowing it to make its own decisions only in matters of indifference (Anglican Article XXI). Churches and their leaders naturally accept this authority readily in theory, but history shows that they find it hard to accept in practice.

Even though they do not indulge in such swollen claims as those of the *Dictatus Papae*, they stretch their sphere of legitimate authority to the limit, acting and speaking as if the Supreme Minister were an absentee, paying lip service to the Spirit, but apparently confident that their own decisions and utterances automatically enjoy the Spirit's sanction. In every age one of the most urgent needs of Christian ministry is that the churches, their leaders, their synods, and their members should realize that the incarnate Word into whose ministry their own is incorporate, and from whose absolute authority their own authority derives, is indeed the living Lord of the church, who is not merely present on occasion (in the Eucharist), and the invasion of whose prerogatives can bring only confusion, disruption, and failure.

The same applies, of course, to the authority of individual ministers, many of whom seem to be under the illusion that they have autonomous authority, as though the author of real authority were not still a living author to whom they are subject. Unquestionably the intrinsic authority of the incarnate Word confers an incomparable assurance. It is divine authority. But to speak and act with this authority is a heady experience if there is no sense of the paradox, or the miracle, that human acts can be the divine Word and act. Unheard of arrogance can be the result.

Nor are the consequences any less disastrous when, in an abuse of office, ministers act as if divine authority were not an issue at all, when they simply air their own opinions, forge their own judgments, and initiate and execute their own programs among people who look to them as ministers of God's Word. If the ministry is properly the ministry of the incarnate Word, it has the valid authority which that Word confers, but it is itself subject to the authority of that Word.

The incarnate Word provides the model of ministry by his own ministry, not merely of word, sacrament, prayer, and act, but also of disposition and character. For Jesus' ministry was a matter of attitude as well as act. We see in him the features of authentic ministry: dedication, self-sacrifice, faithfulness, resoluteness, tenderness, patience and humility. He came to do the will of him who sent him (John 6:38). He resisted the ways of power and self-seeking (Matt. 4:1ff.). 'He set his face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51). He did not break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax (Matt. 12:20). He gave his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). He lived a life of consistent service which was a pattern for the power-hungry and status-seeking disciples (Matt. 20:20ff.). A ministry that is genuinely the ministry of the incarnate Word will conform to this model.

But how depressingly different the reality often is as Christians forget that their ministry is really his. Not without some truth could Emil Brunner describe Christianity as the world's greatest fiasco. Past and present, we see in the churches

and their ministries either the very opposite of the qualities that mark the ministry of Christ or their perversion: either power-seeking, ambition, ruthlessness, severity, and bellicosity on the one hand; or servility, compliance, cowardice, compromise, and indolence on the other. If history seems to record outstanding achievements as well as monumental failures, only a closer inspection enables us to discern in the sorry story a ministry that bears the imprint of the ministry of the incarnate Word. If Christians, and especially ordained Christians, are to be in truth what they are supposed to be – ministers of the Word of God – then they must ask themselves, perhaps more seriously than ever before, what they are summoned not merely to say and do, but also to *be*, in a ministry that is primarily the ministry of the incarnate Word.

Nor may we treat this solely as an individual matter. It has also a structural dimension. From early days, as the churches have grown in numbers and influence, they have developed organizations and institutions that contribute to impairment of the servant character of their ministry. Whether their structures be papal, episcopalian, presbyterian, or congregationalist, whether they be autocratic, oligarchical, synodal, or bureaucratic, the churches have opened their doors to the evils against which Jesus plainly warned his disciples. They have given dangerous power and wealth to some while treating others as pawns on an ecclesiastical chessboard, employees to be hired and fired at will, or as a ‘laity’ that will provide resources (especially money!) for programs over which they have little control. The problems of growth admit of no simple solutions, but the time has surely been long overdue for the churches to stop adapting their structures to secular models and to start conforming them to the pattern of Christ’s own servant ministry, so that in this regard and at this level, too, their ministry can truly be, and be seen to be, the ministry of the incarnate Word.

THE MINISTRY OF THE WRITTEN WORD

If it is true that the ministry is primarily and properly the Word’s own ministry, this applies to the written Word as well as to the incarnate Word. A distinction arises here, for we have seen that in their inner relationship the incarnate Word obviously has primacy. Hence the ministry of the written Word is itself taken up into that of the incarnate Word. God caused the Word to take written form in order to teach us that he has shown his benevolence to us through his Son. He also enables the written Word to perform its function by means of the Holy Spirit, whose inner witness gives it its dignity and authority, and whose illuminating makes it possible for us to perceive it to be God’s Word. Nevertheless, within this ministry of Christ and the Spirit, the written Word has its own particular ministry into which the ministers of the Word of God are integrated as they participate in the ministry of the Word incarnate.

The written Word has this ministry as an ongoing perceptible entity – perceived through (?) Christ himself – in Christian life and history. Karl Barth stresses this point in his discussion of the authority of the Word in his *Church Dogmatics*. At times Christians may ignore scripture, domesticate it, treat it cavalierly or capriciously, obscure it, or rob it of its full power or true sense by additions, interpretations, deletions, or corruptions. But scripture as a written text has its own life and reality distinct from the life and reality of those who handle it. It has, therefore, its own power of rising up ~~again~~ to confront, challenge, correct, reform, and instruct the churches and their leaders and members. In an age of decay the written Word can be the motive power of a reformation; in an age of rationalism it can be the driving force behind an evangelical revival; in an age of ecclesiastical rigidity it can be the

inspiration behind a movement of renewal, upbuilding and consecration. The written Word has its own ministry, enhanced in modern times by the invention of printing and recording and digitalisation, and the distribution of the scriptures in hundreds of different languages across the continents.

The written Word has this ministry in its normative function as the original, divinely inspired, prophetic and apostolic testimony to God's revealing and reconciling Word and work. All subsequent ministry, to be authentic, must be tested and informed by this ministry. As the Formula of Concord (1577) states, holy scripture is 'the judge, norm, and rule, according to which, as by the [only] touchstone, all doctrines are to be examined and judged'. Others put it, it is 'the oldest teaching, and supreme'. It is the 'rule of truth' by which all things should be 'examined, regulated, and reformed', the 'infallible rule' by which to try the spirits, the 'truth of God above all'. It is the voice of the church's own 'spouse over which the church takes not upon her to be mistress'. In it the church 'has all things fully expounded which belong to faith, and also the framing of a life acceptable to God'. Speaking in it, the Holy Spirit is the 'supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined ... and in whose sentence we are to rest'. In virtue of its unique status the written Word has its own unique ministry as Christ exercises his own ministry through it in the power of the Spirit.

The Written Word performs its ministry as it is read and heard congregationally and individually. Most Christians across the centuries have facilitated its work by regular Old and New Testament readings at worship. Always valuable, these are especially so when there are those who cannot read the Bible for themselves. This is why it is so important that obstacles should not impede this public ministry. One such obstacle is the use of venerable but alien or antiquated texts and translations. Another is the use of unskilled or inadequately prepared readers, as though this were an unimportant exercise. Another is the simple familiarity that robs passages of their dynamism. Another is the reduction of readings to a few verses, or even the selected omission of verses, which is especially odd and reprehensible in churches that make much of fidelity to an 'inerrant' Bible. The basic problem, perhaps, is the idea that reading the written Word is merely a tradition, and a failure to see it as a vehicle for the Word's own essential ministry whereby we may come to a saving knowledge of God and to growth in Christian faith, character, and service.

The ministry of the written Word is that of communicating the gospel to the churches and individual believers, and through them to the world. It tells the story of God's dealings with us. It presents the message of Christ and therefore of forgiveness and renewal, with all that this implies, by way of doctrine, personal and social ethic, character, and the ordering of the community and its life and work. Primarily its ministry is positive. It teaches us what to believe, to do, and to be. The Reformers with their eye for abuses tended perhaps to stress its negative function. The written Word is the judge that shows us what to correct or oppose or abolish. 'In controversies of religion or matters of faith, we cannot admit any other judge than God himself pronouncing by the holy scriptures what is true, what is false.' But the written Word does show us what is true as well as what is false. The negative function is the reverse side of the positive. What we first expect from the written Word which illuminates and converts us in the power of the Spirit is knowledge of the gospel, instruction in the new life in Christ, and direction for the affairs of the church and its ministry. Only in the light of what scripture says positively, and with a view to

amendment, do we seek its negative evaluation of the life, teaching and character of ourselves, of others, of the church, and of the world at large.

The need for this positive and negative ministry of the written Word is always and everywhere apparent. Even believers whom it has enlightened have much to learn about the dogmatic and ethical implications of their faith, about Christian lifestyle and character, and about the proper structuring of the churches and fulfillment of their task. Ignorance abounds, as do also misguided and often obstinate opinions, beliefs, interpretations, speculations and agendas. If many Christians do not yet have enough of scripture to hear what it is saying, many, too, refuse to hear or be instructed by it, setting themselves up as its judges instead of letting it be the judge, picking and choosing from it what seems good to them, or simply preferring their own notions and practices. Unquestionably we must read the written Word discerningly if it is to do its work, but one of the most foolish and destructive courses in Christian history is the hampering of its ministry by a sorry failure to listen to it with the requisite and obedient humility; or by an arrogant refusal to accept the requisite normativity of its precepts and precedents; or by a subtle erosion of its message with the help of relativizing, demythologizing, contextualizing, or by an airy appeal to the moving of the Spirit in detachment from scripture.

Opposition or evasion, however, does not negate the Word's own ministry. Obstructed in one age, place, or person, it works in another. Dissected, and mauled by scholarly know-alls, it retains its substance and power. Defeated on the surface, it tackles the roots. Outshone by dazzling novelties, it steadily radiates the light of eternal truth which lasts when the flashy brilliance of its critics and competitors fades. Shouted down by noisy theorists, it speaks its simple, saving message which as the Word of the Lord endures forever. Those who ally themselves with its ministry can be confident. They may be ignored or scorned as reactionary and old-fashioned, they may be tactically outmatched and outmanoeuvred. They may experience what seem to be failures and defeats. But they share in a ministry which, inspired and empowered by the Spirit as witness to the Word, can never be finally arrested or overthrown, but is always that for which God himself has ordained it. As Zwingli stated in his *Clarity and Certainty of the Word of God*, God infallibly does what he says. Because the written Word is *his* Word, we can trust it to do its work of converting, renewing, directing, instructing, judging, and correcting, notwithstanding all our human failures to heed it, to obey it, to rely upon it, or to enter as fully as we should into its ongoing ministry.

THE MINISTRY OF THE PROCLAIMED WORD

Just as the incarnate Word and the written Word have their own ministries, so too does the proclaimed Word. This is not so obvious. We tend to think of this Word more narrowly as the Word that we proclaim today. Reflection shows us, however, that this Word is a past as well as a present Word. As a past Word it confronts us, like scripture, as an objective, historical entity with its own reality and ministry. We might sum up this past Word of proclamation under the word 'tradition'. It embraces the creeds, the confessions, the writings, the rites, the ceremonies, the practices, the policies, the institutions, and the actions of the church's past in the many shifting circumstances of human life and history.

As the ministry of the written Word is not autonomous but relates to that of the incarnate Word, so the ministry of the proclaimed Word relates integrally to the

ministries of both the incarnate Word and the written Word. Deriving its authorization, authority, and power, and indeed its basic content, from the incarnate Word, it does so by the mediation and under the scrutiny of the written Word. Oral tradition in the dynamic sense undoubtedly played an important part prior to the writing and fixing of the canon, but authentic tradition and the canon do not diverge. The proclaimed Word has a valid ministry, then, only insofar as it serves the incarnate Word in accordance with the written Word and in exposition and application of it.

A first glance might suggest that many Reformation statements discount this ministry of the past Word of proclamation. The Belgic Confession bluntly refuses to ‘compare any writings of men, be they ever so holy,’ with scripture (VII). The Scots argues that ‘without just examination dare we not receive whatsoever is obtruded unto men under the name of general councils’ (XX). The Anglican Articles realistically admit that general councils ‘may err, and sometimes have erred, even in matters pertaining unto God’ (XXI, cf. XIX). The Second Helvetic Confession states: ‘We suffer not ourselves, in controversies about religion, to be pressed with the bare testimonies of fathers or decrees of councils, much less with the received customs, or with the multitude of men being of one judgment, or with prescriptions of long time’ (II). ‘All decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private opinions’ are subject to examination (Westminster Catechism).

Nevertheless, the Reformers were qualifying this ministry rather than negating it. So long as the proclaimed Word neither opposes scripture, nor obscures it, nor adds to it, they would accept this Word and profit by it. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Bullinger, and Anglicans such as Cranmer and Jewel all quote the fathers. The Gallican (V), Belgic (IX), Anglican (VII), and Second Helvetic Confessions (XI, XVII) endorse the three historic creeds. The Second Helvetic accepts the witness of the early councils and the Scots, saying: ‘We do not rashly condemn that which godly men, assembled together in general council lawfully gathered, have proponed³ unto us’ (XX). The condemnation of such heresies as Sabellianism, Arianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism is approved. The Belgic Confession commends the true church for its constant defense of the doctrine of the Trinity (IX). The Second Helvetic boldly claims: ‘We retain the Christian, sound, and Catholic faith, whole and inviolable’. The approach to patristic writings is similar: ‘We do not despise the interpretations of the holy Greek and Latin fathers, nor reject their disputations and treatises as far as they agree with the scriptures’ (Second Helvetic II).

Finding much of value in the past Word of proclamation, the Reformers claim a right of dissent only from things ‘differing from, or altogether contrary to, the scriptures’ (Second Helvetic II). This might be the dissent of Knox: ‘If then the interpretation of any doctor, kirk, or council repugn[ant] to the plain Word of God, written in any other place of it is a thing most certain that there is not the true understanding of the Holy Ghost’ (Scots XVIII). Or it might be the more modest dissent of Bullinger, who applauds the fathers because they, too, ‘with one consent, will not have their writings matched with the canonical but bid us allow them so far forth as they either agree with them or disagree’ (Second Helvetic II).

Under the normative authority of the primary witness in the written Word, the proclaimed Word has a valuable ministry of insight, direction, and example. Past interpretations, decisions, and actions open many windows on the substance, meaning, and implications of the divine revealing and reconciling that reached its climax in Christ. They offer helpful hints for the presentation of the gospel, the living of the

³ From the Latin, the word means ‘set forth’.

Christian life, and the shaping of the church and its mission. By the mistakes they condemn and the mistakes they commit they mark off many dead ends of theological and ethical thinking, of liturgical and devotional development, practice, and of missionary and pastoral strategy. With their successes and failures in many different settings they provide models of thinking, worship, life, proclamation, and structure as the churches move into different ages, countries, cultures, and circumstances.

In relation to the past Word of proclamation, the churches face the canonization on the one hand and iconoclasm on the other. It is tempting to appeal to patristic or conciliar authority as definitive and sacrosanct; it saves much effort in thought and debate. Quoting Augustine, Thomas, Luther, or Calvin, or dismissing an opposing view as Docetic, Modalist, Nestorian, or Pelagian, gives much satisfaction. Yet it is equally tempting to reject past authority altogether. The mistakes of the fathers and the problems raised by ancient definitions and policies are plain enough. Demolishing the past, believing that wisdom begins with one's own generation, offering insights without knowing or asking whether some ancient doctor might not have advanced them years ago, developing lines of thought or practice without taking into account prior objections or alternatives or warnings – all this confers a heady sense of originality, freedom, and vitality. But if canonisation easily results in sterility, no less easily iconoclasm yields superficiality

The past Word of proclamation has a ministry that it discharges only if there is a cautious acceptance, such as we see in the Reformers. The proper ministry is within the ministries of the incarnate Word and the written Word. What has been said and done before does not bind us absolutely. Nevertheless, it has much to teach us, insofar as it proclaims Christ authentically according to the prophetic and apostolic witness. Indeed, even where we see it to be inauthentic, we can and should learn from its mistakes of interpretation, inference, and practice, developing discernment that is needed if our own ministry of proclamation is to avoid the similar mistakes that so easily threaten us.

THE MINISTERING OF THE WORD

The ministry of the proclaimed Word is, of course, present as well as past. This fact brings us to our own living participation in the ministry of the threefold Word. It confronts us with our own responsibility as ministers of the Word of God. What does it mean to be taken up into the ministry of the Word? How are we to discharge the task?

We might define the task as that of ministering to the Word and of ministering it to others. We minister first to the incarnate Word and minister it to others. We do so by serving Christ and by presenting Christ as Savior and Lord. In Christian ministry we serve others too – non Christians, fellow-Christians, congregations, authorities of various kinds – but we are true ministers of the Word of God only if we serve Christ first and are servants of others for Christ's sake (cf. 1 Cor. 3:5, 4:1; 2 Cor. 4:5). Similarly, we may present Christ in different ways, from different angles, with different implications, and to different detailed ends, e.g. evangelism, instruction, worship, scholarship, philanthropy, social action or examples, but we are true ministers of the Word of God only if we do present Christ and thus participate in Christ's own ministry.

Sermons that bypass Christ, teaching that gives a false picture of Christ, worship that fails to exalt him, scholarship that obscures his real nature and work, philanthropy

that becomes self-glorification, social action that is a mere advancing of causes, examples that display a Christianity which in no way commends Christ – these may all carry the name of Christ, but only imperfectly, if at all, are they a ministering of the Word of God. The title without the reality is an empty shell which the churches may tolerate but the futility of which history itself – let alone the last judgment – brings to light. ‘Sirs, we would see Jesus’ (cf. Jn. 12:21) is a request that has found way into many pulpits, and it is a request that all Christians would do well to meet as in different forms they give themselves to this ministry, ministering to the incarnate Word and ministering it to others.

We are ministers of the written Word as we minister to this Word and ‘minister it to others’. We do this by enabling the written Word to do its own work and by so opening it up that its message goes out plainly and forcefully to the church and the world. This involves many specific tasks in addition to the public and private reading to which we have already referred. There are the basic tasks of copying, printing, and distribution. There is the delicate task of accurate but idiomatic translation. There is the task of establishing a sound text, that of fixing the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew, that of exposition, that of understanding the themes and contents in the narrower and broader context, that of pressing home the message and its implications in sermons, addresses, lectures, and study groups, and finally that of appropriate application in the life and acts and practice of the churches and their members. The discharge of this ministry will itself be a ministering also of the incarnate Word inasmuch as that Word is the central subject of the witness of the written Word. To present holy scripture is in fact the most direct and effective way to present Christ.

Authentic ministry of the written Word is not, then, a ministry of the written Word alone. Scripture is not just an academic textbook whose contents Christians must learn if they are to pass successfully the last examination. Christ is, of course, presented in texts. The texts are important. There is a genuine need of study, thought, and learning. Dedication to the texts is required for progress in the meaning of faith, the demands of discipleship, and the implications of service. Yet simply to teach these things without bringing people to Christ or helping them to true faith and obedience is not to render true service to the written Word. The goal of the Spirit, the Inner Teacher, is always to lead to Christ by way of the outer ministry of the written Word.

A supposed ministry of the written Word that does not let it speak its own message can hardly contribute to the presenting of the incarnate Word. We have referred already to obscure translation, incompetent readers, and inadequate lections. We might mention also the unseemly wrangling about interpretation that results more in confusion than in enlightenment; the speculative scholarship that substitutes career-advancing hypotheses for objective research and makes of what ought to be ministry an academic game; and the illusion that we can judge the Bible, that we may pose the questions that it ought to answer, or that we may accept, amend, expand, or discard at will its own questions and answers. In ways such as these we prevent the written Word from doing its own work, from making its own points, from passing its own judgments, from putting its own questions and from giving its own answers. We truly minister to the written Word and minister it to others only as we give it free course in proclaiming its own vital message. Our primary task is to let it say what it has to say, to teach ourselves and others how to let ourselves be told what it has to tell.

We are ministers of the past Word of proclamation as we minister to this Word and minister it to others. We do this by making it available, by studying it, by teaching it, by relating it to present conditions, by enabling it to contribute to our own

thinking, writing, preaching, and practice. We sift this Word, testing it by the Written word, but we also learn from it. We learn from it theologically by gaining from it insight into things that we did not see before, or did not see clearly or fully before. We learn from it biblically by letting it correct or supplement our understanding of the written Word. We learn from it practically by receiving instruction from it on the ramifications of discipleship, the methods of ministry, the legitimate options of lifestyle, and the proper structures of community and mission. By opening up the past, and by opening ourselves and others to it, we participate in its ministry, integrating our own ministry into it and thereby furthering also the ministries of the written Word and the incarnate Word. In what forms do we minister the Word of God today? In answering this question we must avoid entanglement in false and destructive antitheses. History has seen heated debates between those who give precedence to word and those who give precedence to sacrament. Both word and sacrament, however, have behind them the precept and precedent of Christ. The Reformers saw this when they linked the two in their description of the true Church. To set them in opposition, therefore, is meaningless and disruptive.

The same applies to the antithesis of evangelism and social action which has done so much damage in the present century. Christ's own ministry was one of both word and work. The early church took this as a model as it combined the remedying of many abuses with intensive missionary efforts. So did the Reformers, who pushed through many practical programs and reforms. So did the great evangelicals, whose social agendas went hand in hand with a vigorous evangelistic, missionary, and pastoral program. Why, indeed, should we have to choose? Individuals may have to devote more time and effort to this task or that, but surely they can do so without disparaging others, and surely the churches can see that their own word-act of ministry must correspond to the word-act of God and of Christ, the act embodying the word, the word expounding the act.

Authentic ministry is multi-faceted. If emphasis often falls on word or sacrament or social action, we certainly must not forget the equally important ministry of worship, which is divine service. This in turn includes intercession, in which we integrate our ministry into the intercessory ministry of the risen Christ, and which is essential to all else that is done by way of ministry. Important, too, is the ministry of Christian life and character upon which the pastoral epistles lay such stress in describing qualifications for the ordained ministry. If Christians do not show themselves to be a 'letter from Christ which all can know and read' (2 Cor. 3:2f.), ministry may be discharged with great energy and competence but it loses much of its credibility and force.

Ministry is also inclusive. The churches use the title 'ministers of the Word of God' more particularly for those whom they ordain to preach and teach and administer the sacraments and offer pastoral care. In fact, however, all Christians are ministers of the Word of God in scores of different ways. They all share in the ministry of the threefold Word. They all present Christ, communicate scripture, and pass on tradition. They do it by service in the churches, by supporting Christian agencies, by fellowship in the body of Christ, by personal witness of word and act and life. Ordinary Christians often do much more than is realized by those who are clergy-oriented or those who see them mostly as a means of funding. Yet more needs to be done to end the unhealthy idea that ministry is a matter for professionals and to achieve a proper balance and cooperation of clergy and people. A more intensive mobilizing of the whole community for ministry will undoubtedly give the ministry of

God's Word an added richness and power and enhance rather than diminish the special contribution of those who are called and set apart specifically to be ministers of the Word.

When we say that the task of proclamation today is to present Christ, to expound and apply scripture, and to pass on tested tradition, the question arises: What precisely is involved, and what is the specific question?

A first answer to this twofold question lies in the modern term 'contextualizing'. Contextualizing is a necessary task, but it also carries with it, as noted earlier, a potential for disaster. The necessary task is that each generation in each country, class, and culture must minister the Word of God in such a way that the people of that generation, country, class, and culture can understand and appropriate it. The potential for disaster is that in making the required transposition they will lose or weaken or pervert the true substance of the gospel.

Living proclamation has the responsibility of achieving the difficult balance between relevance and fidelity. Churches that compromise fidelity, often excusing themselves by a tenuous appeal to the freedom of the Word and Spirit, can easily enough find relevant words, acts, attitudes, practices, structures, and methods. History shows, indeed, that where there has not been adequate vigilance churches have even slipped unwittingly and unwillingly into the relevance that erodes fidelity. On the other hand, churches that have no care for relevance also find no great difficulty, for they simply retain traditional words, acts, attitudes, practices, structures, and methods. History shows again that where the need for relevance is not strongly felt churches can often slip unwittingly and unwillingly into the fidelity that jeopardizes it.

The Word in its ministry is constantly marching into new ages and spreading to new cultures and continents. As it does so the forms must change, the substance remain. Scripture itself has to be put into new languages, or new forms of old languages, but with no sacrifice of its meaning and message. Similarly the gospel in its totality must be translated into new forms of word and thought and life and structure, but again with no sacrifice of its enduring content. The churches constantly face the problem of the Nicene and Chalcedonian fathers as they had to put trinitarian and Christological reality into the contemporary philosophical vocabulary without illegitimately Hellenising the gospel as some critics have supposed. They face the same problem that confronted the medieval church when it tried to establish Christian structures in the Germanic world without the illegitimate secularization that we detect so easily in retrospect. Do we not have a solemn warning against false contextualizing in the structures of our modern churches? Does not electronic evangelism show us how fine is the line between valid use and abominable abuse? Can we not see from such ventures as those of Asian and African theology, with the pressing dangers of pagan intrusion, what a delicate operation it is when the Word must be a living Word but also the same Word if it is to be genuinely God's Word?

The second answer to the twofold question, *What is involved and where is The problem?*, lies in the relation between the human Word and the Spirit who is truly free, yet not free in the sense of being at the beck and call of freely floating human thoughts and fancies. This relation depends on our obedience. Are we setting our relevant human ministry within the perichoresis of the ministry of the Word incarnate, written, and proclaimed? Do we here and now present Christ according to the normative biblical witness and with due regard to tested tradition? If we do not, no facile talk about the moving of the Spirit will give our ministry of word and work validity as the ministry of the Word of God.

Yet even though we seek obediently to integrate our ministry into the Word's own ministry, can we ever take it for granted that we are really ministers of the Word of God, that our words and works are God's Work? Do we not still have to reckon with our ignorance and inadequacy: 'Who is sufficient for these things?' (2 Cor. 2:16)? Indeed, are we not servants whom the Master may use as he chooses and pleases, not as we ourselves decide and plan? Is not God's Word spoken only when he himself speaks it? Even though we do all, does it not depend on God alone whether or not he speaks it?

We certainly need to say and do what we are commanded to say and do as we make the difficult transition to our own time and place. In the last resort, however, humility must accompany obedience. And humility casts us back upon the ministry of prayer in which we are taken up into the intercessory ministry of the risen Word. We need to pray that God will show us how rightly to say and do what we ought to say and do, that he will be pleased to use our feeble words and acts, that he will take whatever is right and good in them and that he will overrule all that is wrong and bad, so that in the power of his Spirit they may be his own mighty Word and act.

Thrown back upon prayer, however, we make this prayer not in the desperation of a last resort, but in expectant hope. Christ not only intercedes for us; he also instituted this ministry of ours and empowers it with his Spirit. Thus we may say: 'Our sufficiency is from God' (2 Cor. 3:5). We, no less than Paul, in our different ways, are ministers of the Word of God. For all our foibles, faults, and failings, we can be letters from Christ. It may be said of our works, too, that people see them and glorify our Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16). Some at least will accept our word, not as ours, but 'as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in believers' (1 Thess. 2:13). In the words of the Second Helvetic Confession (I): "The Lord himself has said in the gospel, 'It is not you that speak, but the Spirit of my Father speaketh in you'" (Mt. 10:20). This is not a blank check. God is not endorsing all that the churches and their various ordained and ordinary ministers may say and do and be. But it is a ground of hope.

God adds his seal and power to authentic ministry. We can take nothing for granted. We cannot afford to be complacent. No autonomy is ours. All power is not given to us. Nevertheless, within the ministry of the Word itself, in the power of the Spirit and the prayer of obedience and humility, our human ministry can be in truth the ministry of the Word of God.

THE WORD AND THE SACRAMENTS

As was said at the commencement of this paper, Baptism and the Lord's Supper are usually regarded separately from 'the ministry of the Word'. But there are some further things to be said, in particular because 'the Word of God' is far more than only preaching and teaching. It is that but only because the Word of God is God himself! By that we should understand that God's Word is his self-revealing of himself. Unless he is the self-revealing God then we are creatures who can know nothing of him.

There is another prior dimension to all this. It is found in the word *perichoresis* which is a Greek theological term which first appeared as a noun in the AD 600s and as a verb in the mid-300s. It refers to the relationships between the three persons of the godhead as each gives place to the others, honors and serves the others. Each person expresses his own person in his intimate relationship to the others and each 'indwells' the other.

This indwelling expresses and realizes fellowship between the Father and the Son. It is intimacy. Jesus compares the oneness of this indwelling to the oneness of the fellowship of his church from this indwelling. ‘That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us’ (John 17:21). The great 12th century Cistercian reformer St. Bernard of Clairvaux spoke of the Holy Spirit as the kiss of God, the Holy Spirit being thus not generated but proceeding from the love of the Father and the Son through an act of their unified will.

“If, as is properly understood, the Father is he who kisses, the Son he who is kissed, then it cannot be wrong to see in the kiss the Holy Spirit, for he is the imperturbable peace of the Father and the Son, their unshakable bond, their undivided love, their indivisible unity.” – St. Bernard of Clairvaux, in Sermon 8, Sermons on the Song of Songs.⁴

Now if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each in the others, the implication is not that there is no distinction between the persons. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit, and so on (which was understood in the early church as a heresy known as ‘Monarchianism’). But in their intimacy, the Father expresses his fulness by giving himself *as Father* to the Son of his love, while the Son gives himself fully to the Father *as the Son* who loves the Father and in love obeys him, and the Spirit gives himself *as the Spirit* of the Father and of the Son, in his honouring each of Father and Son by bringing their true being as Father and Son to full expression. So there is mutual loving, serving, worshipping and giving within the triune God.

Within this ‘perichoresis’ there is, then, *revelation*. The triune God continually reveals himself within his *triune* unity and fulness. Were there no creation there was always God in his self-revealing and self-expressing fulness. But, of course, there is creation and we *are* part of that creation.

Some have said that creation was a work of grace (deriving that from the definition of grace as ‘unmerited favor’). But I prefer to see ‘grace’ as restorative. Creation, on the other hand, was nothing less than pure ‘gift’, the expression of the fulness of God, in particular as that fulness included the Father’s purpose for the Son through the Holy Spirit. So we have such statements as ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork’ (Ps. 19:1); ‘The heavens proclaim his righteousness; and all the peoples behold his glory (Ps. 97:6); ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory; (Isa. 6:3); ‘The earth is the LORD’s and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it.’ (Ps. 24:1).

How do we understand human beings? Isaiah expresses God’s declaration: ‘I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols’ (Isa. 42:8); the psalmist responds by observing, ‘When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of Man that you care for him? Yet you made him a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honor’ (Ps. 8:3-5). All the perichoresis of the triune God moves out to include the creation of all things and in particular the creation of Man. It is this which makes the ‘Fall’ so significant, as in Rom. 1:19-23 and 3:23, etc. It is now Man against God (Rom. 1:18) and the rest of creation (temporarily) hamstrung (Rom. 8:18-23).

By ‘sacrament’ is usually meant a religious ceremony or ritual regarded as imparting divine grace, such as baptism, the Eucharist and (in the Roman Catholic and many Orthodox Churches) penance and the anointing of the sick’, or a physical thing such as ‘the consecrated elements of the Eucharist, especially

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perichoresis>, downloaded 17.06.19.

the bread or Host'.⁵ If these definitions are all there is, then being a minister of the Word and Sacraments would mean being an administrator in an activity or of a substance. But what about a conjunction of word and sacrament? If the Word of God is the Word actively speaking then what of the sacrament?

Much ink, and even blood, has been spilled over the nature and number of the sacraments. Are there seven sacraments or only two and what then? What do these imply? If the Word is merely the Book, then the words of Walter Hilton (1330? – 1396) may be apt:

Learned men and great scholars have devoted great effort and prolonged study to the Holy Scriptures ... employing the gifts which God gives to every person who has the use of reason. This knowledge is good ... but it does not bring with it any spiritual experience of God, for these graces are granted only to those who have a great love for Him. This fountain of love issues from our Lord alone, and no stranger may approach it. But knowledge of this kind is common to good and bad alike, since it can be acquired without love, and men of a worldly life are sometimes more knowledgeable than many true Christians although they do not possess this love. St. Paul describes this kind of knowledge: 'If I had full knowledge of all things and knew all secrets, but had no love, I should be nothing'. Some people who possess this knowledge become proud and misuse it in order to increase their personal reputation, worldly rank, honours and riches, when they should use it humbly to the praise of God and for the benefit of their fellow Christians in true charity. St. Paul says of this kind of knowledge: 'Knowledge by itself stirs the heart with pride, but united to love it turns to edification'. By itself this knowledge is like water, tasteless and cold. But if those who have it will offer it humbly to our Lord and ask for His grace, He will turn the water into wine with His blessing.⁶

If the Sacraments are merely actions or substances, then all that is required is a suitable 'ordination'. But if faith ('great love for Him') is at the heart of it all, then we find ourselves in the presence of the Word, who is *at every point* doing his work.

The Word is present at every point. All that is required is faith, but even that is his work (Eph. 2:8-9) and, on the other hand, the repudiation of all that is not of faith (Rom. 14:23), i.e. repentance, is likewise the work of the Word (Acts 5:31; 26:17-18; 2 Tim. 2:25). The so-called sacred/secular distinction is really not valid. If there is a distinction, it is between faith and no faith. In the words of George Wade Robinson (1838-1877):

Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth around is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue
Christless eyes have never seen:
Birds with gladder songs o'erflow,
Flow'rs with deeper beauties shine,
Since I know as now I know,
I am and His, and He is mine.
Since I know as now I know,
I am and His, and He is mine.⁷

If grace is a 'thing' to be dispensed then sacraments as both action and substance make sense. The Roman Catholic Church has understood there to 'be seven sacraments by which grace is given: baptism, confirmation, penance, the eucharist, ordination, marriage and unction. Reformation theology limited the sacraments to two

⁵ 'Sacrament' in 'Dictionary' Version 2.2.2 (203), © 2005–2017 Apple Inc.

⁶ *The Scale of Perfection*, (Ed. Serenus Cressy, Book I. I. iv).

⁷ From his hymn, 'Loved with everlasting love'.

– baptism and the Lord’s Supper – since only these had explicit biblical sanction’.⁸ Without being negative in our evaluation of these seven – or two – sacraments, all could be reduced to mere activities unless the recipients are people of faith. But with faith the sacrament is potent. We could say that is because in them, even with a deficient understanding of them, people meet God. The operative factor is faith.

‘Baptism.’ Far from debating the amount of water to be used or the method of its application, Rom. 6:1-11 makes it plain that in baptism we are baptised into Christ, into his death and burial with the result that we too might walk in newness of life.

‘Confirmation’. While this assumes the taking upon oneself the promises made at one’s baptism, positively it is a wonderful outward confession of Christ in whom one consciously believes. But again, see the effectiveness of the Word. ‘Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ’ (Rom.10:17).

‘Penance’.

It is called the *sacrament of conversion* because it makes sacramentally present Jesus’ call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father⁵ from whom one has strayed by sin. It is called the *sacrament of Penance*, since it consecrates the Christian sinner’s personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction. It is called the *sacrament of confession*, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a ‘confession’ – acknowledgment and praise – of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man. It is called the *sacrament of forgiveness*, since by the priest’s sacramental absolution God grants the penitent ‘pardon and peace.’ It is called the *sacrament of Reconciliation*, because it imparts to the sinner the life of God who reconciles: Be reconciled to God.’ He who lives by God’s merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord’s call: ‘Go; first be reconciled to your brother.’⁹

This is not a place for debate about ‘the priest’s sacramental absolution’ other than to observe that Jesus did tell the disciples that ‘if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’ (John 20:23; cf. Mark 2:5).

‘The Eucharist’. This word means ‘thanksgiving’ but while gratitude is significant, 1 Cor. 10:16 does indicate that in the eating and drinking there is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ. The reduction of the ‘communion’ to a ‘mere memorial’ does rob the Lord’s Supper, a corporate meal of unity in the church, of a deliberate indication that human unity is our unity with and in Christ.

We could continue with the list in detail, but the point would remain. Christian ministry is participation in the ministry of the Word. Human marriage is the expression of and the anticipation of the great marriage of the Lamb and his bride. Unction, is the participation in the healing ministry of Christ. The Catholic Catechism lists the positive aspects of praying for the sick, and when this is associated with impending death, it is summarised as:

The special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects:

- the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church;
- the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
- the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance;
- the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;
- the preparation for passing over to eternal life.

⁸ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2002, p. 148.

⁹ ‘The Catechism of the Catholic Church; found at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c2a4.htm, downloaded 18.6.19.

Grace is not a thing; Grace is personal as God gives *himself* fully, reveals and expresses *himself* for the good of his whole creation (Rom. 8:9-25). God will have his creation restored to all that he eternally intended. So the Word who was in the beginning (John 1:21) brought the creation into being (Heb. 11:3) and at the right time, as Son of the Father, he became flesh. As the crucified, risen and ascended Savior, he poured out the Holy Spirit on those who believed, and they became participants, both in the present and in hope, in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). He continues the work of renewal through his powerful word (Heb. 1:3) and continues to transform men and women (Acts 12:24; 13:38-49; 14:3; 20:32). What is more, the final removal of all evil does not come through human activity, however much we may be given to share in that ministry, and is described in Rev. 19:11-13.

Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called – THE WORD OF GOD.

It is he whom we serve!

1. We cannot live without His Word,
We cannot live without His Voice;
We dare not think the thoughts of men,
Or, in the words they give, rejoice.
The primal darkness fled the scene
When God gave utterance to the Word:
The Spirit moved across the deep
And all obeyed the Voice it heard.

To live afresh each time You speak
Your love to us in all our parts.
Ah, Father God—whose Word is power—
Ah, Spirit-Word that flows so free,
Ah, Living Word, ah, Son of God,
We worship—Word-in-Trinity.
© 1992 Geoffrey Bingham. Used by permission.

2. God spoke the Word that made the world,
He spoke the truth and Man was made;
In joy and peace and love they lived,
And walked with Him from day to day.
The serpent brought the word—deceit—
And spoke it to the primal pair.
Another word than God's had come;
This word was death, and death to prayer.

3. Down through the ages our God speaks—
The primal couple heard the curse—
The prophets never ceased to tell
The Word in image, song and verse.

The might and holiness of God
In love and mercy present are
Where'er the Word is uttered forth
By sun and moon and furthest star.

4. The Word made flesh has come to dwell
And show in human modes our God.
That Word heals Man and makes him pure
By power of His flowing blood.
This Word is life to us who hear.
Our spirits by that life are fed.
We share this life with all mankind;
We offer them the Living Bread.

5. Ah, Word of God we weep with joy
To have Your Voice within our hearts,

P.T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, 1993, p. 53-55.

The one great preacher in history, I would contend, is the Church. And the first business of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach. Yet so that he is not its echo but its living voice, not the echo of its consciousness but the organ of its Gospel. Either he gives the Church utterance, or he gives it insight into the Gospel it utters. He is to preach to the Church from the Gospel so that with the Church he may preach the Gospel to the world. He is so to preach to the Church that he shall also preach *from* the Church. That is to say, he must be a sacrament to the Church, that with the Church he may become a missionary to the world.

You perceive what high ground I take. The preacher's place in the Church is sacramental. It is not sacerdotal, but it is sacramental. He mediates the word to the Church from faith to faith, from his faith to theirs, from one stage of their common faith to another. He does not there speak to un-faith. He is a living element in Christ's hands (broken, if need be) for the distribution and increment of Grace. He is laid on the altar of the Cross. He is not a mere reporter, nor a mere lecturer, on sacred things. He is not merely illuminative, he is augmentive. His work is not to enlighten simply, but to empower and enhance. Men as they leave him should be not only clearer but greater, not only surer but stronger, not only interested, nor only instructed, nor only affected, but fed and increased. He has not merely to show certain things but to get them home, and so home that they change life, either in direction or in scale. It is only an age like the present age of mere knowledge that tends to make preaching the statement of sound and simple truth, interesting but powerless. It is only an age which starves the idea of revelation, by its neglect of the sacramental idea, that reduces preaching to evangelizing alone. It is only an age engrossed with impressions and careless about realities that could regard the preacher's prime work as that of converting the world, to the neglect of transforming the Church. It is only such an age that could think of preaching as something *said* with more or less force, instead of something *done* with more or less power. We spend our polemic upon the Mass, and fitly enough in proper place. But the Catholic form of worship will always have a vast advantage over ours so long as people come away from its central act with the sense of something done in the spirit-world, while they leave ours with the sense only of something said to this present world. In true preaching, as in a true sacrament, more is done than said. And much is well done which is poorly said. Let the preacher but have real doings with God and even with a stammering tongue and a loose syntax he will do much for life which has never yet been done by a finished style. The preacher may go "lame but lovely", to use Charles Lamb's fine phrase. His word may lack finish if it have hands and feet. He is a man of action. He is among the men who do things. That is why I call him a sacramental man, not merely an expository, declaratory man. In a sacrament is there not something done, not merely shown, not merely recalled? It is no mere memorial. How can you have a mere memorial of One who is always living, always present, always more potent than our act of recall is, always the mover of it? What he once put there might be a memorial, but what he is always putting there is much more than that. It is at least his organ. It is, indeed, his act. It is something practical and not spectacular. A revelation may be but something exhibited, but in a sacrament there is something effected.

And the one revelation in the strict sense is the sacrament of the Cross, the Cross as an effective act of redemption. A revelation of redemption is a revelation of

something done; and it is only a deed that can reveal a deed. If the preacher reveal redemption he does it by a deed, by a deed in which the Redeemer is the chief actor, by some self-reproduction by Christ, some function of the work of the Cross. He has to reproduce the word of the beginning, the word of the Cross which is really the Cross's own energy, the Cross in action. No true preaching of the Cross can be other than part of the action of the Cross. If a man preach let him preach as the Oracle of God, let him preach as Christ did, whose true pulpit was His Cross, whose Cross made disciples apostles, in whose Cross God first preached to the world, whose preaching from the Cross has done for the world what all His discourses – even *His* discourses – failed to do.