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Restoration, Power, and the Task of Ministry: Reflections from Three Generations

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Reflections from Three Generations

By Mark Love

Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets,
who lead my people astray,
who cry "peace"
when they have something to eat,
but declare war against him
who puts nothing in their mouths.
Therefore, it will be night to you, without vision,
and darkness to you, without divination. . . .
But as for me, I am filled with power, with the
Spirit of the Lord,
and with justice and might,
to declare to Jacob his transgression
and to Israel his sin.

Micah 3:5-6,8

The title of this essay suggests a far flung enterprise comprising a few thoughts in relation to many subjects. The trick, of course, is to have enough thoughts that overlap the areas of discussion so as to bring some coherence to these ponderous meanderings. I fear that I have far too many impressions and not nearly so many clearly defined

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points. I dare to share them at this point, however, because they grow out of a need to define my role as a minister in more precise terms in relation to my tradition, the biblical witness, the responsible use of my professional training, and the needs of the congregation I serve. My sense is that my struggle for ministerial identity is not unique. Hopefully, this essay will turn over a small plot of ground that can become a seed bed for discussion and reflection.

Three Generations

My grandfather, Claude Guild (whom I love very much), was and is an "Evangelist." He is very good at what he does. His life work has been given to starting congregations. I now minister in an area of the country where he has cut churches out of nothing save the preaching of the good news and the charisma of his person. He would come to a town, debate the denominations to level the playing field, hold and host well attended gospel meetings, vigoursly pursue contacts, and recruit and train elders and deacons. Once a congregation was established he was usually off, like a hired gunslinger, to some new work. This model for ministry came from his reading of Acts and the Pastoral Epistles.

Recent trips to his home have been treats — sort of like "quantam leaps" onto old paths now virtually overgrown. He showed me a little notebook with worn and tattered pages. Names of persons

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baptized and restored fill the pages. Nearly every name brought with it the story of a prolonged gospel meeting. Kept near this treasured little notebook is a large scrapbook. Inside, articles and ads advertising debates and gospel meetings are kept. While theses momentos from his ministry have great personal and sentimental value, they also serve as certification of his competence as an evangelist. As with many preachers of his generation, my grandfather has a published book of sermons (two actually). While they carry his distinctive stamp and style, the titles are similar to those found in other collections of the day: "What the Church of Christ Teaches that Others Do Not;" "Repent or Perish;" "Baptism and Salvation;" "The New Testament Church;" "Converted to What." They would all make good try-out sermons for an evangelist.

My father, Stuart Love (whom I love very much), was and is a "Minister." While the street sign at the then College Church of Christ in Abilene had advertised many fine "evangelists," my father's designation was minister. His role was defined less by church planting and more by church serving — the spiritual building up of the church through attention to teaching, preaching, visiting, and fellowship. I remember sermons on "body life," spiritual gifts, and servanthood. If my Grandfather found his model for church work in the Pastorals, my father read the gospels and passages like I Corinthians 12-14; Romans 12, and Ephesians 3 to find a model for ministry.

My father is well educated. While his advanced degrees were not universally appreciated, his education provided more than just "in-house" certi-

fication. They carried with them a recognition of training for his task — training centered almost exclusively in biblical and theological disciplines.

I too bear the title of minister. Most titles in my generation, however, have more than one word — pulpit minister, education minister, youth minister, involvement minister, children's minister, senior's minister, worship minister, counseling minister, ad infinitum. I live in the age of specialization.

My training reflects the increased emphasis on "professionalism" in ministry. I have a secondary degree, without which I could not get my foot in the door in most churches. In addition to training in biblical and theological studies, my education has been supplemented with "how to" courses. Small group dynamics, systems and organization theory, counseling principles, personality testing and evaluation, dispute resolution training, and an increased emphasis on homiletical theory are a part of my professional training. My resume is bolstered with information on parenting workshops and church growth seminars attended.

While theological justifications can and have been found for these specialized tasks[1], models for ministry are more pragmaticly rooted with less care to find precedent or mandate in the biblical witness. For many of us, it has become useful and convenient to find the example of Paul or Jesus coinciding with what works. I do not mean this to be overly critical. This concern with what works in ministry has allowed a new creativity to overcome the sometimes lethargic patternism typical of restoration types.

I make these generational observations, not to hold up any one age as the golden era of church work, but merely to provide a reference point to ask questions of our notions of restoration and power in relation to ministry and the church.

As One With Authority

Jackson Carroll, in his book **As One With Authority**, analyzes the shift in conceptions of ministerial authority as they have been experienced in American churches over the past several decades. While our ministerial forebears were accorded authority and power within the church because they *represented the sacred* in a meaningful way, today's ministers labor in the age of professionalism and are accorded authority in relation to their *expertise*. The minister's role has shifted from "sacramental person" to church "technician." As a professional churchman the minister must bring to the role a "certified competence," or credentials that demonstrate his expertise in matters ranging from counseling, to small groups, to church growth, to staff administration.

Carroll points up some ironies in the progression of this shift in relation to the power and authority of a minister. The move away from representation of the sacred came at least in part with the American democratic ethos and its religious corollary of voluntarism. Simply stated, the market place of American churches created a voluntary membership which made clergy responsible for the needs, opinions, sensibilities, etc. of church members. The previously unquestioned authority of God's representative now was redefined in relation to the needs and desires of the membership. This shift has recently flowered with a stated emphasis on "shared ministry," or the energizing of the laity for ministry. A minister's authority is now dependant upon his ability to create and maintain a dynamic congregational life that meets the needs of consumer members and maximizes the gifts of congregational participants.

While these cultural shifts have been accompanied by some good and welcome theological underpinnings, by and large the new relations of power between minister and congregation have gone critically unexamined. As Carroll points out, the emphasis on shared ministry has "helpfully and justifiably called into question the kind of authoritarianism associated with an autocratic style of ministry that keeps laity dependent." Churches have rediscovered the importance of passages like Ephesians 4:1-16 and have emphasized the equipping of the saints for ministry. But as Carroll also points out, "shared ministry, ascribed to uncritically without understanding the different but complimentary callings of clergy and laity to ministry, can lead to considerable confusion about authority for ministry for clergy and laity alike."

The chief irony is that a movement intended to divest power in the clergy class and redistribute it among the laity has resulted in many cases in churches with pastors with unquestioned authority. Their power comes not from their role as priest, but as expert. They are empowered not so much by a sense of calling, but because of their ability to plan and implement program.

This is not to say that ministers should not exercise power or have authority in congregational settings. What is troubling is an ever increasing tendency to seat ministerial power in the realm of program expertise. As Carroll points out, seminary training is edging away from the disciplines of theology, history, and biblical studies, and embracing areas of "practical" concern. What may emerge from such an emphasis is a class of minister who wield power because of unquestioned usefulness to the congregation, but who lack the capacity to critically evaluate the use of that power from biblical or theological perspectives.

The Need for Biblical Models

Micah would have nothing to do with certified competence. His calling was independent from the concerns of institution, and as such his message was liberated. Micah distinguished himself from the class of prophets supported by the monarchy and its attending institutions. Unlike the "bought" prophets whose vision was co-opted, Micah could speak a word independent of security needs or institutional plans. Micah's probelm with the court prophets was that their vision was connected to their stomachs. Their words were valued because of their usefulness to the institution. This being the case, the capacity for a court prophet to speak an authentic word from the Lord was nill. Though powerful, the court prophets lacked vision from God.

There are places other than Micah in the Bible to draw out a model for ministry. Even prophets in Micah's day, notably Isaiah, negotiated the tenuous relationship between word and institution dif-

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ferently than Micah. But Micah is a biblical model for ministry that speaks directly to notions of ministry and power.

I am fearful that with an increased emphasis on professionalism and certified competence, we are moving away from biblical and theological models for understanding ministry. Our current questioning of restoration as an organizing principle makes this shift all the more acute. We may question our forebearers' understandings of certain biblical models. We may question their limited appropriation of the variety of biblical models that exist. We may certainly question whether adequate theological reflection accompanied their appropriation of biblical models. But we cannot question their desire to understand their roles directly in light of the text.

We have seen a recent shift in power arrangements in our churches away from the elders as "chairmen of the board." Ironically, we have piled much of that power up in the church office in the hands of a" professional." Given the uncritical nature of this shift, we may find ourselves in a few years worse off than before. There seems to be a growing sentiment to invest power in "senior pastors" who have their hands all over the program of the church. I am fearful that the pulpit will lose the independence necessary for the proclamation of the word to be vital. Micah is right. The Word must be greater than the concerns of the institution. The prophet must be more than the mouthpiece for a growing church.

We must critically examine relationships of power within our churches. To do this responsibly will require that we think biblically and theologically about the role of the minister. At this point, we must allow our heritage as restorationists to stand. I may not be an evangelist. I may not be a minister in the same vein as my father. But I am convinced that faithfulness to my calling requires that I define my role as they did, biblically.