

Is Our View of Ministry too Narrow? Is It too Church-Focused?

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Congratulations to all of you on this terrific occasion!

Most of you, I expect, will be moving on now to some new ministry beyond your work here as students. You likely already have pretty well framed ideas about the ministry.

Much of the positive Christian influence on me and my seminary friends was through people who thought that God's most important task is world evangelism and that the most important thing we can do is tell people about Christ, help them become believers, and then teach and train them to be faithful to Christ, to lead and disciple others. Since the church in those days wasn't doing a very good job, we felt that it was probably best to serve God through a parachurch ministry such as Young Life or Campus Crusade.

Now, I would still say that making disciples is right at the heart of the Christian ministry, but after a few years in ministry, my perspective broadened. Two things had happened: First, I had experienced a clear call from God to enter ministry in a local church. There was a group of us in our 20s and 30s who felt called to the Episcopal Church, to bring renewal and reform, and to call the denomination back to its Reformation heritage. We scattered across the country in churches where God led us, and set

about praying and working for revival and reform. Secondly, by now I was married, having children and realizing how important it is to serve and nurture one's own family. Trying to be a good and godly father and husband was my first priority, and building up and renewing the local church became the focus of my life. I spent a great deal of time trying to help everyone in our church learn to grow in Christ, find their spiritual gift, and get involved in ministry in the church.

Then after several more years another broadening experience – a friend of mine refused to stand up in church one morning when I called on everyone to stand as a way of expressing their desire to serve Christ sacrificially as Christ's servants. He told me afterward that the way I described Christian ministry left out all those folks who were focused on trying to be God's servants in the workplace and marketplace. I had become so intent on building up the local church, seeing it become strong and healthy and active, that I was apparently implying that's all that mattered.

My friend got my attention.

I realized I had unconsciously developed a view of the ministry that was too narrow – too church-focused.

Some time later, I went to another friend to discuss an idea I had, to recruit young men and women just out of college, to spend a year at our church in intensive training to become youth ministers – a sort of intern program. He wasn't very enthusiastic, though he believes deeply in youth ministry – said I wasn't thinking big enough, said what we really ought to do was give young people a vision not only for serving God in the local church, but beyond that, to equip them to serve as God's ministers in the market place.

Out of that discussion we developed a program called TFC Fellows that is an intensive one-year residential program that involves seminary-level theological training, a part-time job in a field of their interest, mentoring by wise and thoughtful men and women who serve God passionately and primarily in a whole host of areas, and we train them as well in how to evangelize and disciple others. Now several of them have gone on to do youth ministry or become pastors of churches, but the vision that has caught people's imagination and the reason there are now a dozen or so similar Fellows programs around the country through our expanded Fellows Initiative, is frankly that *God calls most people into ministry in the world* rather than just focusing their attention on the local church. As Luther said, the cobbler at his bench can be serving God just as effectively and importantly as the pastor in his parish.

Men and women, you are finishing school at a time in which there is quite a bit of ferment about these ideas of ministry and about the role of Christians in society.

Christian leaders have quite different ideas about the role of the church in society, in the culture. We agree that Western culture is desperately sick – materialism, consumerism, modernism, secularism. These are powerful gods, and we all fear that today's American idols – pleasure, security, choice, fame, entitlement – will be more appealing than Christian virtues like justice, responsibility, thrift, service, faith.

How are we to lead our churches in this generation? Let me mention three different approaches within today's evangelical community.

First, some theological conservatives adopt a defensive mindset – the church against the culture, the church maintaining orthodoxy and orthopraxy in a wicked world, putting up walls between itself and society, establishing a complicated parallel culture with Christian yellow pages, Christian music, Christian schools, Christian coffee houses, church bowling leagues, a parallel world that is pure and uncontaminated, claiming to preach the gospel to the world but attacking the world, attacking Hollywood, attacking the public schools, attacking the media, fighting over issues like pornography, abortion, homosexuality, evolution, etc.

The idea here is that secularization is the main problem in our society. If God could be returned to our schools and to our government, if the church could only regain its standing in society, if the family in America could be restored, then somehow the Christian ethical view could become prominent again, and godly people would be effective in influencing government and society for great good. So the idea is to keep arms length from the culture, try to establish Christian alternatives, somehow take over and transform society.

A second group, old time liberals and now, interestingly, some progressive evangelicals, view our calling in the church differently, to be more relevant to the felt needs of people and the pressing issues of this day – many mainline churches and emerging churches realize that the established, conservative churches are not speaking to the culture effectively and not connecting, are alienating many, out of touch with so much of the culture – “Christianity has an image problem” – and so young leaders are talking about engaging the issues that people care about, becoming relevant. They don't want to be viewed as old-fashioned or judgmental, and so they downplay the more divisive issues, they pay less attention to the doctrinal aspects of the faith – it's not that orthodoxy is unimportant but the call

seems to be more about doing than believing. Listen carefully and you'll hear echoes of this thinking around you.

Then third, a smaller, yet vocal portion of today's Christian church (and these would follow some of the Anabaptist traditions) is focused on maintaining the purity of the church, convinced that there is little that can be done about the world. The world is irredeemably twisted and fallen, so the church must increasingly withdraw into her own communities with less and less involvement with the culture, celebrating the sacraments, serving the poor, loving one another in strong community with little sense of responsibility for becoming involved in politics, or public education or local government, for instance – the church, they feel, has no responsibility other than to be itself, intent upon maintaining its own righteousness.

Of course, these are oversimplifications, but I'd like to propose a fourth, an alternative way in which to view our role in guiding the Christians and churches we will be serving, particularly as relates to our ministry in the culture around us.

The images in the New Testament that describe the church and our relationship with the culture are arresting – lambs among wolves, seed, salt, light, leaven, a people penetrating Satan's fortresses, a peaceful kingdom though not *of* this world, certainly *in* this world, serving God in all layers of society as his faithful presence there.

Some of my close friends in DC have interesting visions for their Christian ministry.

- One writes regular editorials for the Washington Post, attempting to represent a thoughtful commentary on the nation's affairs, from his perspective as a believer.
- One owns scores of charter schools and is attempting to provide the finest education possible especially for inner city children across America.

- One buys companies that are in serious financial trouble, and seeks to turn them around and preserve jobs for the people in the communities where the businesses are located.
- One is psychologist in the State Department who strives to help our nation's diplomats maintain their mental health as they serve in some of the most stressful places in the world.
- One is a lawyer who works in the entertainment industry.
- One works for the national Chamber of Commerce seeking to assure that America's businesses are ethical.

These men have gone into extremely difficult fields with the goal of bringing a principled, Christian presence and perspective while seeking to serve the welfare of people. Every day they encounter huge spiritual and moral challenges – often there are no simple, clear cut Christian answers and frequently they have to settle for proximate justice rather than perfect justice, or settle for a careful, nuanced Christian word rather than a direct evangelistic challenge. It isn't easy to be Christ's man or woman, on Capitol Hill or Wall Street, or Hollywood or wherever, but God's people need to permeate every layer and every level of our society and do simply the best they can to be God's lights in these places. I'm afraid that our culture has become so suspicious and so cynical towards evangelical pastors and churches, that now it's our people – the folks we baptize and disciple and encourage and minister to day in and day out, who can represent Christ and his church best, not us. Our task is to strengthen and sharpen them for ministry.

So friends, I want to encourage you to a big view of the ministry, a broad view that aims at discipling and healing and equipping and *encouraging* your people to get out into the difficult and dark places of the community and the city, and simply do the best they can to love their neighbors and work for the common good. Don't pull back from evangelism, and don't slack up in Christian education, children's

ministry, global mission trips, counseling. But do your best to dignify all Christian calling to serve God in all sorts of ways, commission and pray for your teachers and nurses and secretaries and accountants as well as your missionaries and Sunday School workers.

The Old Testament prophet Daniel is a striking model for ministry whether one is ordained or not, and I'd like you to think about him for a moment.

You know the story of Daniel – he lived in one of the most difficult periods for God's people, as an exile in a pagan land – Babylon. I find his example instructive to me as a pastor in a secular city, but also he is a model of a man committed to serving God in a most difficult and worldly setting. He's a bureaucrat, an administrator, a counselor, a teacher, a diplomat, a trusted advisor to the most powerful person on earth. He is a wise man in a most confusing time. Daniel reminds us that some of the people we serve in our ministries are in vocational settings that are much more difficult than our own. Their ministry can be a lot harder than ours.

He was called by God to serve the very man who had defeated his own country, who laid waste to his hometown Jerusalem, a man who was responsible not just for the death of many people whom Daniel loved, but also for destroying the holy temple, the most sacred of all places, a ruler who Daniel surely must have feared and hated, at least at first. He had to make costly, risky decisions about being faithful to God in a pagan court where his every breath was monitored.

It is a curious relationship in which God calls a uniquely gifted man of great faith to give his life to serve a pagan king. In the end, after years and years of faithful service, after Daniel and his companions had nearly come to ruin, again and again, this same monarch came to faith in the one true God. Repeatedly he withstood all temptation to deny his Lord, or to just tell the king what he wanted to hear. In the end he became so valuable to the king that none other had such influence. But at the same time

he could never feel really safe or secure – his life was always in danger.

The people who I serve in Washington, in the arena of government and politics know something of this sense of insecurity – one misstatement, one miscalculation, and your career can be over. It's a cruel and difficult business – people of integrity and those with little sense of honor seem equally vulnerable. How do we as pastors help people out on the frontline of Christian service in the world? How do we help them learn to trust in God, and be true to Christ in an environment where so frequently compromise and false promises are the order of the day, when expediency and the bottom line take precedence over integrity.

How do we inspire them to put loyalty to Christ above all else? How does one attain the sort of faith that says, "I will do the right thing here even though it may cost me everything – if I perish I perish"? How does one get to the place where he can say even as Daniel and his friends said – "God will protect us from the fire, but even if he doesn't, we will not worship your golden idol."?

There are three simple hints in chapter one of Daniel where he and his friends made three decisions: to settle down and serve, to stay together, and to take a stand. These were commitments that enabled them to be steadfast and strong in God.

You don't get this unless you remember that they were aliens in a foreign culture. They had assumed they would be in Jerusalem all their lives. And then all was uprooted when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were carried off into exile.

This forced them eventually to change their thinking about God, and how he was going to work out his purposes for them in history. For too long the Jews had interpreted the Word of God simply according to their own self-centered ideas. They thought they would remain in the Promised Land forever and Jerusalem would become the center of a

glorious new world commonwealth in which all who came to God would prosper.

However, in just a few short years they were a small minority living in a threatening, alien culture, where their traditions and their faith were little more than a curiosity at best. Orthodox believers, living here in the West, have begun to feel a greater and greater kinship with those Jews in exile, more like exiles in a pagan land.

How would they survive without being swallowed up by Babylonian culture?

That's the question all Christians must ask – in U.S. or Iraq or Europe. How do we remain faithful to Christ in a culture that is overtaking the church?

Daniel and his friends faced a difficult choice. A pagan administration offered them the possibility of career and responsibility. Should they simply settle down, get comfortable and cooperate without criticism – live and let live, go with the flow? Forget Zion, forget the past, get on with the times?

Or should they go the opposite way – refuse any sort of fraternization with these heathen, view this as a temptation to evil, cling to the idea that to serve Nebuchadnezzar in their generation was as big an evil as accepting the tyranny of pharaoh in Egypt, centuries earlier.

There were those among them who took that route. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps... how can we sing the Lord's song in foreign land?” (Psalm 137)

But the prophet Jeremiah sent a letter – he was still in Jerusalem. In it he offered advice. Perhaps it influenced Daniel and the others. This, Jeremiah wrote, is what God says to you:

“Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your

daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Were they to turn their backs on their faith and simply be assimilated into the culture? No.

Instead, they were to settle down in an alien culture and live there for a long time, cooperate with political structures already in place there and gain respect, if possible, as loyal citizens who served the nation, but all the while maintaining their close communion with God and all that was essential in the way God had called them to live.

This is true as well for Christians today, wherever they live. Yes, our culture is wicked in so many ways, and yes, our faith is viewed cynically by so many, as irrelevant, outdated – so what do we do, just pull back in our little churches, isolated and complaining? No. We are to settle down and seek the welfare of the country and city where God has put us, never forgetting that our true home is in heaven. We're to do good to all people and seek the flourishing of all people.

Second, Daniel and the others committed themselves to one another. Here were four exceptional young men who loved God passionately. Read their story and see that whenever possible they met together to worship God and to encourage and support one another through discussion, prayer and study. They needed one another, needed each other's encouragement and accountability to be faithful to God – they had no church, no pastor, and often they were separated from one another. So they learned to pray for one another and maintain strict discipline in their private lives particularly in prayer and in the study of God's law – they drew deeply upon the word of God's truth. They laid out their difficulties before God in prayer, and they were strengthened, they made a commitment not *just* to settle down, but to stick together. We desperately need the same thing. I'd never have made it in ministry without

other brothers and sisters who would meet with me, encourage me in God's word, and believe in me as God's servant.

The third decision made by these men was to take a stand and draw a line, a line that seems peculiar to us but made a huge difference to them. What was it? From the beginning they refused to eat the royal food and consumed only vegetables and water.

How odd!

They took Babylonian names, they dressed and spoke as Babylonians, they took jobs in a Babylonian administration. They made numerous concessions to this pagan culture, but here they drew the line, a rather strange place. I think perhaps it was a simple way to be reminded three times a day that they were still different (their values, their priorities) because they served the one true God.

Now we know, "it's not what goes into a man but what comes out that matters" (Matthew 7:15). Still, there are certain trivial-seeming decisions that can become quite important in retrospect. Little steps of resistance like pinning a yellow star to your lapel in Germany 70 years ago, or deciding to carry a placard, or refusing to go to the back of the bus, or refusing to go along with the majority in some way, that looking back, is actually quite important.

Learning to say, "no" to Babylon in this one small area, every day, over the years, was possibly what enabled them to say no at other times when the stakes were extremely high. They enjoyed life in Babylon. They served and cooperated with their captors and they paid tribute to Nebuchadnezzar, but they never forgot who they were, truly, and were always prepared to resist when the interests of Babylon came into conflict with the interests of the kingdom of God. Three times a day they were reminded whose they were.

We failed in our efforts to change the Episcopal Church. As of now there are 600 or so churches (including my own) that departed, or are attempting

to, and even as we are in costly litigation, many paying a high price for their obedience to Scripture, still, over the years Daniel's example was instructive. Even as the church was disintegrating doctrinally and ethically, we gave ourselves to it, joining in and participating in much that we didn't fully support, but still, we played by the rules for 30 years. At the same time, we formed little covenant groups and met to pray and encourage one another, to seek God's will and study his word. When we felt we had to take difficult stands, we stood together as co-belligerents in an extremely uncomfortable ministry. We required of one another that at such moments, we would speak and act with courtesy, respect, and humility, remembering just who it was we were trying to represent. And now we are watching as God is doing a truly new thing, joining us together in unexpected ways with Anglicans in Nigeria, and Kenya and Uganda, and Bolivia, and many other places. Something new is coming into being!

But back to you now, as I close. I hope you will find yourselves in a strong and healthy church home. But let me remind you, as much as we'd love to be living in Zion, we don't. God has called us to Babylon. This is our home for now, and this is where we are called to build disciples and build churches. God will give you people to shepherd and serve, and they may actually be more effective for Christ's kingdom, and influential in our culture as laymen than you or I. Encourage them, believe in them, pray for them. Be patient with them. Don't attempt to insulate them from Babylon, but tell them they are Christ's seeds, sent out to produce fruit, and they will.

And as you shepherd them, tell them these three things, and remind yourself as well.

If you want to be God's faithful ministers in your city, you must settle down and commit yourself to serve, to seek the welfare of your community, to be involved, caring, and working for the sort of changes that God would want.

Second, we need one another – every one of us needs to be in relationship with other believers so that we can help one another along the way, both encourage and challenge one another. Isolate yourself, try to make it on your own, you'll surely fail.

Finally, you need to discern where *you* are going to draw the line that reminds you every day that you belong to Jesus Christ – I don't know where it is that you should decide to take your stand, but you will know, if you ask God to show you. You have to decide where the hedges are going to be placed in your own behavior, and keep to them, or else when the real time of testing comes, you will fail. It's in the little things where a character is forged.

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