

The Ministry of the Church – What Are We To Do?

The Church: Guide to the Reformed Tradition, Wallace Alston, John Leith, Ed.

Characteristics of the Ministry of the Church: defined in the Confession of 1967:

The life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ has set the pattern for the church's mission. His life as man involves the church in the common life of men. His service to men commits the church to work for every form of human well-being. His suffering makes the church sensitive to all the sufferings of mankind so that it sees the face of Christ in the faces of men in every kind of need. His crucifixion discloses to the church God's judgment on man's inhumanity to man and the awful consequences of its own complicity in injustice. In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming, the church sees the promise of God's renewal of man's life in society and of God's victory over all wrong.

The church follows this pattern in the form of its life and in the method of its action. So to live and serve is to confess Christ as Lord. 9:32, 33

The Threefold Nature of the Church's Ministry

1. The ministry of the church is to proclaim the gospel; its ministry is essentially to proclaim the faith that the God who created the heavens and the earth is revealed in certain normative events in the history of Israel, and supremely in Jesus Christ, as God of mercy and of grace; to declare God as the living God.
2. Second, the ministry of the church is to explicate the gospel, explaining what it means and showing how it makes itself intelligible to people. God speaks in order to be understood.
3. The ministry of the church is the application of the gospel. The church does not proclaim and explicate the gospel in a vacuum just as it does not live in a vacuum but in relations= to the particular human realities, needs, questions, problems, and possibilities of the world in which it lives.

The Forms of the Church's Ministry (from Karl Barth) Twelve categories, consisting of six forms of ministry in which speech is predominant: praise, preaching, teaching, evangelism, missions, and theology; and six in which action is predominant: prayer, the cure of souls, personal witness, service, prophetic action, and fellowship.

1. **To Praise God in Christian worship** is to affirm, acknowledge, and celebrate both the existence of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and the activity of God whereby God renovates the fallen world. (Calvin believed that most of the ceremonies and rites of the church benumbed people rather than proclaiming, explicating, and applying the evangelical truth to their lives.
2. **The Ministry of the Church is to preach the gospel.** "What is at issue in preaching?" Barth asked. "Decisively that the community, and with it the world, should remind itself or be reminded explicitly of the witness with which it is

charged, that it should find reassurance as to its content, that reflected in it Jesus Christ Himself should speak afresh to it, that it should be summoned afresh to His service in the world.”

3. The **ministry of the church is teaching**, the instruction of the church, and the instruction by the church of the world, in the knowledge of God.
4. **The ministry of the church is evangelism and missions.** Christ did not say to his disciples, ‘Go forth and celebrate the mass’, but ‘Go forth and preach the gospel.’ The church lives today in a pluralistic, secular, technological, mobile, rootless, urban world. In this world, few legal, psychological, social, or theological pressures remain to compel people to be Christian and to join the church. The church is a more radically voluntary association than it has been since the first century, and people are more radically free to belong or not to belong than ever before. Consequently, whether in rebellion against old authorities or by simple preference, many people live apart from the church. Old traditions, memories, stories, and values, which once gave definition to life and located people in a certain circle of meaning, have been lost. Many people in this society, being now traditionless and thus adrift, are also lost.
5. **The ministry of the church is world missions.** In a world that majors in confrontation and violence, the gospel holds up the vision of mutuality and reconciliation. In a world that no one understands even after scholars have explained its parts and processes, the gospel celebrates a sense of mystery, which does not explain what we do not know, but helps us to know and to interpret what we do not know in a new light.
6. Sixth, **the equipping of the Christian for the tasks of theological reflection and witness.** Theology is a human work, susceptible to all the limitations of finitude. The Reformed tradition has consistently emphasized the science of theology – articulating the Christian faith in intelligible and systematic ways to be of primary importance for the integrity of the existence of the church.
7. The whole ministry of the church is utterly dependent upon God for its existence, maintenance, and efficacy. There is no form or function of the church that is self-sufficient and self-validating. **Thus a basic form of the church’s ministry is the ministry of prayer.** In prayer, said Karl Barth, the community keeps God to His Word, which is the promise of His faithfulness as the Word which calls, gathers, upbuilds and commissions it. (p 146)
8. **The cure of souls refers to pastoral care** and represents another basic form of the ministry of the church.
9. An absolutely crucial form of the church’s ministry, yet one that is particularly difficult to describe from the standpoint of the Reformed Doctrine of the Church, concerns **the development and nurture of illustrative personal examples of Christian faith and life – sharing your personal faith with another human being.**
10. The church bears graphic witness to what God has done and is doing to restore the fallen world in its “diaconate” – **the ministry of helping service to people in need.** The ministry of service, however, cannot be defined simply in terms of helping

people who are injured, ill, deprived, or oppressed. this ministry is never adequately undertaken unless it is also understood that the human need to which the church seeks to be responsive grows out of systematic disorders in the society at large, by which the church itself is implicated. "The diaconate, and the Christian community become dumb dogs, and their service a serving of the ruling powers, if they are afraid to tackle at their social roots the evils by which they are confronted in detail. (Barth)

11. Another form of **the ministry of the church is prophetic action**: the action of word or deed that is based on insights into the meaning of events, relationships, and social systems, in the light of their positive or negative relationship to what God has done and is doing to renovate the fallen world. John Calvin stands out in the history of the church as one who was more vividly aware than almost any other of the mighty working of God in human history and of god's call to his people for service in the world. Calvin's intention in Geneva was not simply the salvation of individuals, but the transformation of the city into a holy community in which God was worshipped and served.
12. Finally, **the ministry of the church is to establish fellowship among people**. The church does not create fellowship. Fellowship is both God's gift to the church and a basic form of the ministry of the church. When the church establishes fellowship among people, it bears witness to God's own nature. It testifies to the faith that binding love, inter-relatedness, and community are rooted and grounded in the Godhead, that God is the one whose love binds loved ones together, who wills that all men and women should live in community, and who gives fellowship among people as his good gift. Calvin wrote "to travel as pilgrims in this world that our celestial heritage may not perish or pass away." The image of the pilgrim continues to be suggestive for the existence of Reformed churches today. To be a pilgrim is to be on the move from somewhere to somewhere, oriented by a sense of purpose and direction. To be a pilgrim is to be at home in the world, yet at the same time to be a stranger to it. It is to live as a responsible citizen of the cities of the earth, yet always on the lookout for the 'city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.' (Heb. 11:10). It is to travel with fellow travelers from birth to death in a pilgrim band, thankful that god has left no one to travel the road alone. To be a pilgrim is to follow Jesus Christ, the Pioneer of our salvation.