

## OTAGONIST CORNER

### Ministry as Discipleship

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I am proposing that we begin to reconceive ministry in terms of discipleship. It seems to me that the time has come for many of us to let go of an identity and self-understanding which has "Minister" as its primary designation, and to embrace instead a self-understanding which is defined by these words: "Disciple of Jesus Christ."

This proposal springs from a long-held suspicion which has hardened now into a conviction. The conviction is this: that it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid slipping into a ministerial mindset and modus which eclipses our fundamental vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ, that this represents an ecclesial as well as an existential crisis, and that the resolution of this crisis requires nothing less than a radical reconception and recapitulation of our vocation.

It is not just the "professionalization" of ministry which concerns me now, though that is easily the most visible manifestation of our disease. Nor is it just the current infatuation with managerial competence and leadership skills--zealously promoted by much of the literature on "ministry" and by our own seminaries--which troubles me; this is the natural fruit of professionalism. What I am primarily concerned about is our seeming powerlessness to fashion a genuine alternative to the official role-consciousness which animates this professionalism. Merely reemphasizing, for example, the centrality of preaching, teaching, and theologizing in ministry does not deliver us from the stranglehold of functionalism. The exigencies of life and work in a narcissistic and technological culture force the most stout-hearted of us into a preoccupation with their function and effectiveness (as "ministers") in their respective communities. It is the pervasive and monolithic character of this ministerial mode of consciousness--appropriately dubbed "pastor-think" by a friend of mine--which concerns me most.

"Pastor-think" (or the undifferentiated mindset and modus of "Minister") greatly concerns me because it has what seem to me to be unacceptable existential and ecclesial consequences. Existentially, it drowns the awareness and practice of true discipleship. Waking (and even sleeping) hours consumed increasingly by our concern for leading people cannot be given to our concern for following our Lord Jesus Christ. I therefore raise, as a central issue for our time, the question of whether ministry can ever be a "plus" or "extra," something "beyond" or "outside of" true discipleship. Are thoughts and acts of "ministry" which are not exhausted by our thoughts and acts of discipleship really thoughts and acts of ministry? Can a self-understanding and modus operandi which not only fail to enhance the knowledge and embodiment of our own discipleship, but actually militate against them, make any claim to Christian ministry? I confess that to press these questions against the background of my own "ministry" lays open my own deep sense of spiritual poverty.

But "pastor -think" impoverishes our churches also, by depriving them of that one thing needful" for lack of which they suffer most. Not competent

administration, powerful preaching, or tender-loving-care--but a living, breathing sample, an experimental paradigm, of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in this time and in this place. "How can we live the Christian life in the modern world?" (Bonhoeffer). This is always the crucial question. In our own time: How do we live in a hungry world? How do we live without contaminating the earth? How do we live in ways that put family, work and play, and money and possessions in proper perspective? How do we live, in short, as Christ's disciples here and now? The issues of discipleship are the issues of ministry! Our churches desperately need ministers who will forswear "pastor-think," who will enter body-and-soul into the common struggle of Jesus' followers to discern and live out the meaning of discipleship for our time, and who will be courageous enough to let this reality determine the shape and character of their pastoral activity.

What I am advocating is release from the "high anxiety" of leading the people (Ministry) and return to the "easy yoke" of following Jesus (Discipleship)--not as some new form of escape or flight from responsibility, but because that is precisely what Jesus has called us to. He has called us to be his disciples, no more and no less.

Let us reclaim the noblest but forgotten elements of our anti-clericalist heritage, and affirm that ministry is discipleship. Let us confess that our mindset and modus of "Minister" has been used to excuse us from the costly grace of discipleship so that we might immerse ourselves in the cheap grace of "pastor-think." Let us begin to think of ourselves, and to act, once more as Jesus' disciples; and to discover in the doing that ministry--the marvelous power to transform lives--comes mysteriously as a gift to all those for whom it is enough to take up the cross and follow Jesus. Then Bonhoeffer's great beatitudes shall have been pronounced upon us:

Happy are the simple followers of Jesus Christ who have been overcome by his grace. . . . Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship. Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy.