

Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry

By Dr. Bob Young

Introduction: Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry

For me, passionate ministry arises from the challenges and possibilities of being a pioneer. No one before has walked this exact pathway. Ministers committed to blessing God's people and a lost world with the message of Jesus must not only integrate God's word with cultural and contextual sensitivity, but must also develop leadership skills, relationship skills, and equipping skills.

My early training for ministry was, I believe, typical of the times. In the late 1960s, many congregations of churches of Christ, especially in the rural areas where I grew up, were happy to have a minister at all. To have a preacher with a college degree was considered a special blessing. I began my collegiate career at Wichita State University as a mathematics/chemistry and music major. I took typical courses—Philosophical Readings, Rise of Western Civilization, Persuasive Speaking, Interpretive Speaking, literary interpretation and analysis. When I transferred to Oklahoma Christian at the beginning of my junior year to complete a Bible degree, a full slate of Bible, biblical languages, and related courses awaited me. In a process that I only understood later when I began working in the academic world, I escaped courses like homiletics, exegesis, and hermeneutics because of generally parallel courses already on my transcript. (I did not however escape Dr. Dunn's biology class, despite having 18 collegiate hours of lab science in chemistry.)

When I graduated in 1970, I began preaching full-time in a congregation in southwestern Arkansas. I encountered the usual pitfalls. I had taken all of Dr. Jones's Old Testament textual courses, and at times I was about as tactful as some of the Old Testament prophets. I had taken enough Greek with Dr. Kelcy to translate the text (and to earn a minor in Biblical Greek), but the process of understanding what the text meant and how to apply it was often beyond me.

I went back to school and eventually earned additional degrees which sharpened both knowledge and skills. Along the way, both before and after my post-baccalaureate studies, have I learned as much from HKU (Hard Knocks University) as I did from OC, HU, PTS, HUGS, or ACU. I share these under three headings: character (connecting who I am with how I live), skills (what I do), and thinking (how I perceive the world around me).

First, I have learned that how one lives life matters. How one lives one's life is reflection of one's awareness of God's calling. My lifestyle can never disconnect from God's calling and claim on my life. This can be described in many ways. For me, three concepts have continually risen to the top.

God calls us to competence. *I was raised to value competence. In my family, it was important to do one's best. In ministry, the question cannot be escaped: "Does the minister know what he's doing?" Churches want to know. In Christianity, and thus in ministry, one can never stop striving to be the best one can be. The study, progress, growth, challenges, refreshment, new directions never stop. Lots of short-cuts exist. It is easier than ever to preach somebody else's sermon (thanks to the Internet). Ministers who make a difference over the long haul will continue to study and grow, and to develop increasing competence.*

God calls us to authenticity. *Our contemporary world struggles with the question, "What is real?" What does it mean to be real? Churches want to know if preachers are authentic. Does he live what he preaches? Is his life consistent? Is he honest? Is his word his bond? Churches want to know, "Is he genuinely 'for us' or are we merely another rung on his ladder? Much goes into authentic living. One cannot ignore the call to authenticity.*

God calls us to integrity. *Call it what you will—consistency, lack of hypocrisy, dependability, reliability. At the end of the day, the lack of integrity is the undoing of our health and wholeness. After all, that is what the word means: whole*

SESSION #1: Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry Thinking about Ministry, Authenticity, and Accountability

Goal: ministry in word, prayer, heart (compassion)

The importance of ministry

- No US county with church growth exceeding that of 10 years ago
- It appears that first time marriages may have only a 50% chance of success
- 75% of African-American babies are born out of wedlock
- Families are struggling, and crumbling
- Society is disintegrating due to the loss of family frameworks.
- Nehemiah deals with the challenge of crumbling walls

Authenticity

Are you real, are you genuine? Being, not doing.

1. Wholeness
2. Humanity and image of God
3. Balance

Accountability

- For what does God hold us accountable? What are the essentials?
- You cannot prioritize essentials, all are essential.
- Absence of one thing messes up everything else: interdependence.

#1: At the Center/Focus/Purpose

Solitude, we are most “in touch” with God in solitude. We sort our values in solitude, school for leadership development, make a list of leaders who were formed in solitude.

#2-4: Relationships (10 commandments were relational)

*Heart of worship, made for intimacy, do I live intimately with God, do I seek his presence, do I honor/adore/magnify/glorify him, is he my paraclete, 2 Kings 6

*Handful of godly friends, intimacy, friendship more than fellowship, personable vs. personal

*Faithfully live out my family role(s)

#5-7: Living Life (10 commandments dealt with living life)

*Pick up the towel and basin; advance the cause where it is not. Jesus disappointed more people in his lifetime/ministry than any other person, but he pleased the Father

*Learn to work hard and enjoy work (acquired taste)

*Rest/sabbathing; 20-25% of Jesus’ ministry was spent in intentional rest

#8-10: Stewardships

*Stewardship of my body

*Stewardship of my possessions/stuff and my opportunities—the fool in Proverbs lives in chaos regarding possessions

*Stewardship of my mind, creativity

SESSION #2: Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry

Challenges of Ministry: Calling and Character

Accountable to God—becoming a leader

Self-Awareness, calling, motivations, continuing development

“Ministry begins with the minister's God-relationship. Perhaps more than ever, ministry demands committed leaders with self-awareness and integrity.”

This session explores contemporary ministry through the lens of a God-relationship of self-awareness, integrity, calling and commitment, considering the unique personal challenges of the modern world.

#1: Establishing the Center/Focus/Purpose

Solitude

We sort our values in solitude, school for leadership development, make a list of leaders who were formed in solitude.

Centered/purposeful/focused living

We live a certain kind of life before we serve or minister. We learn focused living; we learn values; we learn a purposeful integrity.

We discard the selfish, the spectacular, the short-cuts.

Ministry formation

We struggle with ministry formation. We are pulled in too many directions. We must determine the nature of our own ministry, based on who we are, and develop competence.

My personal spiritual genogram, my ministry genogram

Who are the persons who have gone before me, influenced me?

My calling consistent with my gifts

God calls us consistent with our gifts, we must identify those gifts, we must model and mentor gift-consistent Christianity.

My spiritual relationship with God

God holds us accountable for our vertical relationship first.

Were we more spiritual before we became ministers? Were we more spiritual before we started our academic pursuits? Do we read the Bible for personal growth?

SESSION #3: Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry

Challenges of Ministry: Developing Skills to "Equip and Empower"

Accountable to God for others: relationships, communication, Interpersonal Skills

"God holds me accountable for developing healthy relationships in my life. Ministry demands relational, communication, and interpersonal skills."

This session will involve attendees in personal reflection and interaction designed to develop appropriate relationship skills for ministry.

More Accountabilities

#2-4: Relationships (the Ten Commandments were relational)

- Heart of worship, made for intimacy, do I live intimately with God, do I seek his presence, do I honor/adore/magnify/glorify him, is he my paraclete, 2 Kings 6
- Handful of godly friends, intimacy, friendship more than fellowship, personable vs. personal
- Faithfully live out my family role(s)

My God

- Describe the "heart of a minister"
- Relationship with God
- Communication with God
- Distinguishing relationship and work

My family

- Why do the families of ministers sometimes struggle?
- The nature of family relationships (mentored or demanded)

My friends

- What challenges do you feel or experience in forming close friendships?
- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills, caring (ministry students at Baxter)
- Are we weird? Is it OK to be weird? Is it better to be weird?

Ministry Skill Sets

Knowledge without skills profits little. Three sets of skills have been especially important for me in developing meaningful and effective ministry.

Leadership skills. I have observed that much of what occurs in the local church and in ministry rises and falls on leadership. One may be right, but if no one is following, nothing much will come of it. As teaching requires that one know the material and the students, ministry requires that one know the Bible and that one know people. The leader must be an influencer, a vision caster, and a change agent.

Relationship skills. The saying is true, "People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care." People are a minister's greatest asset, the church's greatest asset, with the greatest potential for appreciation in value. I am amazed that ministers spend so little time cultivating people, developing people, and training people. Some of the people that will insure the future of the local church where you attend do not yet attend. A commitment to developing relationship skills forces one to identify the motivational principles that move people. Effective relationship skills employ relationship rules that must never be broken.

Equipping skills. Those that are closest to you will determine the level of your success. Working with other people results in addition. Working without other people results in subtraction. Working through other people results in multiplication. Working in spite of other people results in division. Effective ministers and church leaders recruit capable people who can help them, and train those people effectively. The biblically mandated mission of church leaders, to equip saints for works of service (Eph. 4:11-16), is a glaring omission in many churches. Learning how to involve others will increase your effectiveness. Someone has summarized the Great Commission this way: disciple people, develop people, deploy people. An effective minister understands how to pour one's life into those with potential, how to equip others for effective ministry.

SESSION #4: Current Challenges and Directions in Ministry

Challenges of Ministry: "You and Me" Accountability

We are accountable to God for life: personal spirituality, community spirituality, servant hearts

"Ministry too often seeks to hold others accountable without demanding personal accountability. What does God expect from those who serve?"

This session will help participants develop a short-list of accountabilities to God and suggest ways to renew and relish the life to which God calls us.

#5-7: Living Life (The Ten Commandments dealt with living life)

- Pick up the towel and basin; advance the cause where it is not. Jesus disappointed more people in his lifetime/ministry than any other person, but he pleased the Father
- Learn to work hard and enjoy work (acquired taste)
- Rest/sabbathing; 20-25% of Jesus' ministry was spent in intentional rest

Serving

Are we servants? How often? Are we professional servants? Are we always on call?

Sweating (working)

Are we willing to work? Do we model a good work ethic?

Sabbathing

Do we know how to rest? Do we know the rhythms of life?

#8-10: Stewardships

Stewardship of my body, my mind, my creativity (SELF)

Stewardship of my possessions and my opportunities (STUFF)

The fool in Proverbs lives in chaos regarding possessions

Stewardship of my opportunities (SITUATION)

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Group Discussion Questions

Becoming an Effective Leader: Calling and Character
Authentic Accountability to God

Think of preachers (in or out of the churches of Christ) who don't seem quite real. What factors contribute to their seeming hypocrisy? What are some of the "character factors" that are essential in ministry?

What kinds of things did you think about as a result of the discussion about authenticity and accountability? Was the discussion threatening, at what points did it resonate, what are your points of disagreement?

How does the "being vs. doing" tension help or hinder your practice of ministry?

What is the "center" of your ministry? [church growth, success, faithfulness, Christ....]
Is the center of your ministry the same or different from the center preferred by your church members or identified by the church leaders? Why and how? What could you do to help them match more closely?

If ministry demands a balance, how do you keep in view that God holds us accountable for both sides of the balance? (ministry concerns and personal concerns)

Discuss the balance/tension between calling and self (selfish) motivations. How does a minister balance these two factors?

What factors would you include in "ministry formation"?
Do you consider spiritual development and/or spiritual relationship with God easy or hard for ministers? What are the factors (positive and negative)?

How does calling influence character? How does character influence calling?

Why is it hard for ministers to be involved in continuing personal, professional, and skill development as a life-long learner?

What are the significant factors in your "spiritual" genogram? What are the significant factors in your "ministry" genogram? Why are they the same or why are they different?

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Group Discussion Questions

Effective Relationships, Communication, and Interpersonal Skills: Developing Skills to Equip and Empower
Accountable to/for Others

Effective Relationships: "You and Me" Accountability
Accountable for Life

Discussion point: Further define and discuss the phrase "hearts of worship." In your opinion, what percentage of preachers has a well-developed "heart of worship?"

What are the greatest challenges in your efforts to live intimately with God?

How do you distinguish friendship and fellowship? When are they the same, if ever? When are they different? How easy/hard is it to have intimate friends within the congregation where you serve? Give the reasons behind your answer.

How do you compensate for the potential lack of (close) friends? Do you seek out other ministers in churches of Christ (why or why not)? Do you seek others outside the networks of the churches of Christ (why or why not)?

What are the greatest challenges to faithfully living out your family role(s)?
What methods have you found effective in developing healthy family relationships?

What "skill sets" would you add to the skills lists shared in the session? What skills have been most important for you in ministry?

How can we help one another to greater accountability (and authenticity) in sabbathing, serving, and sweating?

What stewardships would you put in your list of accountabilities? (Reminder: mine are mind, possessions, body)