

MINISTRY LESSONS

Things I have learned in twenty-one years of ministry

I sat down at my desk for my first day as a minister twenty-one years ago this May. After busying myself arranging my little stack of books (I only had a Bible and four other books) and a few works items I realized something – I had no idea what to do. I have, fortunately, learned a few things about ministry over the years. In particular, I have developed some convictions that shape my practice of ministry, beliefs drawn from the Bible’s portrait of the church’s identity and of life in the church. This lesson will consequently consider three of those insights and how they can help us think about church.

“Joined and held together by every joint”¹

- A tendency exists in our culture for people to consider church as a service provider whose value is determined to the consumer based on programs and their benefit to them.
- The New Testament offers a different view of the church’s value – the New Testament pictures church as a body of people united together to serve rather than to be served. Consider:
 - *1 Corinthians 12:12-26* – church depends on each person who occupies an essential role given to them by God.
 - *Ephesians 4:15-16* – church properly functions to the extent that each person fills their God-given role.
- The New Testament’s picture of the church has led me to a few ministry insights:
 - Relying on a small, elite group of volunteers hinders, rather than helps, the church.
 - Many people do not know their role in the church. Ministry should consequently seek to create opportunities for service so that people can find the place God has given them in the church family.
 - Ministry is a slow process filled with experimentation.
 - Ministry is messy because it seeks to include as many people as possible.

“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ”²

- Jesus clearly and repeatedly taught that the Bible focuses on him (*Matthew 5:17-18; Luke 24:44-47; John 5:39-40; John 14:25-26; 16:12-14; cf. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16*).
- Jesus’ place within God’s Bible reveals the place he must have within our lives - he is the center around which we revolve our identities and activities.

¹ *Ephesians 4:16*. All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

² *1 Corinthians 2:2*.



- Placing Jesus at the center of ministry has a specific goal that provides the not-so-secret secret to a successful ministry.
 - Teach people to fall in love with Jesus (*John 14:15, 24*).
 - People who fall in love with Jesus will be properly motivated to be like him (*Romans 8:29; 1 Corinthians 11:1; Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:1-8*).
- I have noticed, however, that:
 - Many people know *about* Jesus, less people *know* him.
 - An insistent focus on Jesus makes some people uncomfortable.
 - It proves very easy for other focuses to take Jesus' place (*cf. 1 Corinthians 1:10-15*).

“Devote yourself to the public reading of scripture”³

- Paul instructed the minister Timothy to devote himself “to the public reading of scripture” (*1 Timothy 4:13*).
- Good reason motivated Paul’s instruction:
 - God has chosen to reveal Himself to us primarily through the Bible’s Jesus-focused story (*1 Corinthians 2:6-16*).
 - It is through scripture that God provides the instruction that equips us “for every good work” (*2 Timothy 3:16-17*).
- Despite the important place God gives to the Bible, a tendency exists for people to focus on things like programs and personalities that offer more certain paths to ‘success’ in ministry.
- But, as Jesus noted about some of the people in his day, we can be Bible focused and still miss its message (*John 5:9-40*).
- We can misunderstand the Bible’s message because it contains a big, sprawling, complex narrative that, by admission of some of its own writers, contains things “that are hard to understand” (*2 Peter 3:16*).
- A couple passages have proven helpful for me in thinking about how to foreground the Bible in my teaching in ways that helps avoid misunderstanding:
 - Teach the Bible in ways that communicates its “sense”, teach so that people understand not only what the Bible says but how and why it says it (*Nehemiah 8:8*).
 - Teach in ways that illustrates a biblical way of thinking rather than simply giving ‘biblical’ answers (*Romans 12:1-2*).

God has entrusted the care of the church into the hands of the Christians who populate it. He has also given a limited set of teachings for its care, trusting in our ability to faithfully apply those teachings to the wide variety of circumstances we encounter. Let’s therefore be clear about the teachings that are to ground us and talk together about the ways we can faithfully work them out within our church family.

³ *1 Timothy 4:13*.

