

Lay Ministry Defined and Refined

Part I

What?

Lay ministry means different things to different people. It is a paradox, being at the same time both a simple and a complex term. While it is generally understood that a Layperson is any non-ordained person, and the word ministry refers to offering help or aid, nevertheless, there is still confusion as to the breadth and scope of a lay minister's role. In some churches the layperson's duties may be limited to specific, selected, and traditional church functions such as singing in the choir or teaching a church school class. In other churches, lay people assist with duties requiring more specialized training and responsibility such as hospital calling evangelism, and counseling. Although the role may vary from church to church, the intent is the same universally: lay ministers are people in the body of Christ following the scriptural admonition to "serve one another" (Gal. 5:13).

Why?

The reason for having the laity share responsibilities of ministry with the clergy is obvious. One minister alone, even if assisted by deacons or other clergy, simply cannot be all things to all people. There are not enough hours in a day or enough physical and spiritual energies in one body for a single minister to meet the total demands of an entire congregation. A more important reason is that it is scriptural. When Moses was attempting to do his job alone, the Lord sent his father-in-law to counsel him otherwise, saying, "it is not good. You will surely wear away. You are not able to perform alone. Provide out of the people able men such as fear God to help you" (Ex. 18:17-23).

The New Testament teaching on "body ministry" (I Cor. 12) likewise exhorts the entire congregation to share in ministering one to another. Christianity was never meant to be a passive religion with its adherents sitting by, watching a selected few do all the Kingdom's work. The book of Acts describes the first-century church as a beehive of activity where everyone was involved in praying, sharing, loving and giving. The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19 admonishes Christ's followers to "go ... make disciples ... teach ... baptize" (action words). If each Christian would seek and find his or her individual calling and then faithfully perform that ministry, there would be fewer overworked clergy and more vibrant and effective churches!

Who?

Many Christians believe that only clergy, missionaries, and a few, select laypersons receive a "call" to serve God. The fact is that everyone has a place of ministry. Those who argue that they have no talent or that they are unskilled or that they are inadequate in one or more ways have only to look to Moses as an example. Moses used every excuse he could think of to escape his calling. He thought he had a good out when he reminded God that he was slow of speech and would, therefore, make a poor speaker or leader. To Moses, God replied, "Who made man's mouth?" It was a reminder that God promises to equip his servants for whatever calling he gives them. Often, the more inadequate and incapable people feel, the more likely they will be usable, for they will depend upon God's ability, not their own. The Lord frequently uses unlikely prospects in his service, so that no one can say a servant did anything through human strength. All the glory goes to the Lord. I Corinthians 1:26-27 says it this way: "You see your calling, brethren, how that not many mighty, not many noble are called. But God chooses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and God chooses the weak to confound the mighty."

When the Scriptures tell us that many are called but few are chosen it becomes evident that we can remove ourselves from being chosen if we do not respond to the call when it is given. There are numerous biblical examples of simple, uneducated, and seemingly inadequate people being used in mighty ways when they gave the proper responses. When God called a humble peasant girl named Mary to be the mother of the Saviour, she responded, "Be it unto me according to thy word." When the call came to a little lad named Samuel, the response was, "Thy servant heareth." Fishermen dropped their nets to follow Jesus' call; a tax collector quit his job to answer the call. Shepherds said, "Let us go!" St. Paul said, "What will you have me to do?" And Isaiah said, "Here am I. Send me." The Lord has not stopped issuing calls. In his infinite wisdom, he has set apart a place of service for each of his children. Some are called to visible ministries, recognized and applauded by many; others are called, to unseen, unlauded ministries known only to God; all are called to be available to perform the ministry that is tailor-made for the individual: "God has called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (II Tim. 1:9).

Where?

For some people there is a distinct division between their spiritual life (which includes church attendance and performing religious duties) and their secular life (which includes home life, work, recreation, and social relationships). Such a distinction should not exist. Jesus was the same wherever he was - whether he was reading the Scriptures in the synagogue, enjoying the party at the wedding in Cana, healing the sick, or relaxing at the home of his friends in Bethany. With his life as our example, we must, likewise, consider our ministry as a way of life, an attitude that should pervade every action in every life situation. Although the church is the first place that comes to mind as the logical locality for Christian ministry, it is by no means the only place for service. Jesus took great care to explain to his followers that whenever and wherever they fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick, showed hospitality to a stranger, or counseled those in prison, they were, in reality, ministering to him: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). One who takes such an attitude will find that life takes on new meaning. Whether it is a mother preparing meals and ironing shirts, a businessman closing a deal, students preparing themselves for their life's work, a consumer dealing with an unpleasant store clerk, or anyone else in any sort of life activity, there is a choice - either seeing the activity as a dutiful chore that must be reluctantly contended with, or seeing it as an opportunity to minister love to others in the name of Jesus. The first step in all forms of ministry is beginning with the premise that Christians exist in the world to be like Jesus, One who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. If all Christians adopted such an attitude, think of the changes that could occur in homes, schools, businesses, communities, governments, and the world!

How?

Once a Christian is convinced that God does, after all, have a special calling for him or her beyond the basic attitude of seeing each life activity as a form of ministry, what then? How does one go about discovering one's particular gifts and ministries? Does one wait for an angel to appear or expect to hear God's call from a burning bush? Such would be the exception, not the rule. There are some practical steps that can be taken in seeking to find God's will in an individual's life. First, read and understand what the Scriptures have to say about gifts and ministries. Second, do some introspection and self-analysis to determine where one's own unique attributes fit into the overall scope of body ministry. And third, take appropriate action.