

Lay Ministry Defined and Refined

Part IV

From Gift to Ministry: No gift of the Holy Spirit is some kind of merit badge or identification of special spirituality. The Lord does not give gifts to people who do not want or cannot use them. Gifts differ "according to the grace given" (cf. Rom. 12:6-8). The Holy Spirit will always give the necessary gifts to those whom he has appointed to a particular task. Just as people who have no carpentry work to do have no need of hammers and saws, so people who have callings not requiring the use of the "tools" or gifts of the Spirit may not manifest such gifts. Not everyone has the same gifts; not everyone has all gifts: "But all these [gifts] work by the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will" (I Cor. 12:11). It must be remembered that all spiritual gifts are to be used in love. The entire thirteenth chapter I Corinthians is devoted to teaching that "though we speak with tongues of angels, have the gift of prophecy, understand all knowledge, have enough faith to remove mountains, if we have not LOVE, we are nothing." Spiritual gifts are love gifts from the Father to his needy children manifested through one to another. Attention should never be placed upon the gifts, but upon the Giver of the gifts. No human being "possesses" a gift anyway. Only the Lord can bestow gifts, but how marvelous that he allows open willing Christians to be the "delivery boys" to bring his supernatural gifts to one another!

Although all Christians may manifest one or more of these spiritual gifts from time to time, those persons who devote themselves continually to be used in practicing that gift on a frequent, recurring basis are said to have a "ministry." For instance, all loving parents become involved in teaching and counseling their children and most Christians pray for the sick, but only those who have a definite calling to do so become Bible teachers, prayer therapists, or healers as a regular ministry. Whereas I Corinthians 12 describes the spiritual gifts available for ministry, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4 give descriptions of the functions or offices in the church for specific, delegated responsibilities. The following is an attempt to define and explain these designated ministries in practical ways.

Service Ministries: Every aspect of Christian ministry can be included under the broad category of service. Service is helping others or devoting oneself to godly and worthwhile practices in the furtherance of God's Kingdom. More specifically, it is attending to any of the church functions for which lay persons assume accountability - such responsibilities as ushering, committee work, caring for the church building, lay reading, etc. All members of a church should be attuned to hear the Lord's call to their particular place of service, ready to volunteer for that place of service, and then dedicated to perform the assigned tasks faithfully and diligently. Finding a place of service is not an optional aspect of Christianity but rather, the expected response to the admonition of Galatians 5:13: "By love, serve one another."

Teaching Ministries: Teaching is imparting information or proclaiming precepts of truth vocally, visually or by example. Bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and group leaders of all kinds become involved in various aspects of a teaching ministry, The Holy Spirit can inspire and "teach through" those who allow him to do so; therefore, professional training (while helpful) is not a prerequisite to being called to a teaching ministry. What is required is an openness to the leading of the Spirit and a willingness to give the necessary time to prayer, study, and advance preparation. Even those who assume teaching responsibilities in a limited way - parents, counselors, etc. - should join those in full-blown teaching ministries in following the example of the Master Teacher, Jesus Christ, for the teaching pattern that brings the best results: first, teaching by example (Jesus never asked others to do anything he would not do); second, teaching in terms that hearers understand, with illustrations, stories and examples that clarify lessons; and third, teaching with applications relevant and practical in daily life ("Go thou, and do likewise").

Exhortation Ministries: Exhortation is calling forth the best from others: encouraging, admonishing, advising, or inciting to proper action. It is helping others to be more dedicated to Christ. A lay reader who proclaims the message of Scripture; those who teach, preach, counsel, witness, or lead; those who write letters to shut-ins or speak words of encouragement to the sorrowing or sinful; and those who compliment clergy or laity for jobs well done are all involved in the ministry of exhortation,, a ministry to which many more Christians should become dedicated.

Giving Ministries: Giving is sharing what one is or has with others. Generosity is a sign of Christian dedication and maturity, an indication that the believer is becoming like God, who is always generously giving and blessing. Those who give offerings and tithes to the church or who support other charities for the building up of God's Kingdom (missionary offerings, contributions to spiritual projects, support of the needy, etc.) are giving their earthly treasure to heavenly purposes. Those who give of their talents (choir members, musicians, artists, decorators, gardeners, writers, etc.) to assist the church or community are investing their natural and cultivated abilities in God's service, And those who give their time (for worship, ministry, prayer, outreach, fellowship or volunteer work) are being good stewards of the precious gift of time (for which they are accountable to the Giver of all gifts).

Leadership Ministries: What Romans 12:8 in some translations calls "ruling" may be better interpreted "leading." Leadership is setting the pattern for others to follow - by direction, instruction, guidance, encouragement, or example. Every church group, guild, committee, and programmed activity needs leadership, whether it be a recreational leader directing games, a social Leader planning fellowship activities, a spiritual leader conducting a group worship service, a prayer group leader coordinating a prayer ministry, a training leader conducting a workshop or a task leader directing a work session. Those who have natural or cultivated leadership abilities (or, even without them, find themselves thrust in a place of leadership) should remember that those in authority must be under authority. Every leader should submit both to the leading and direction of the Holy Spirit and to an earthly authority who will confirm and correct the conduct of the leadership activities and approaches.

Ministries of Mercy: Mercy is kindness and compassion, especially that demonstrated to those who seem least deserving of it. Bearing one another's burdens may include forgiving those who have erred, comforting the bereaved, helping those who face a crisis, ministering to the sick, becoming a peacemaker, or offering assistance to those in need. Many various ministries of outreach encompass the showing of mercy - hospital calling, counseling, visiting, making things or giving things to the poor, befriending the lonely, greeting visitors or newcomers, and countless volunteer efforts that are outward evidences of the inner grace of mercy. All forms of ministry should be predicated on the assumption that because God is merciful, we ought to be also.

Ministries of Helps: To help is to give assistance or relief from distress where it is needed. There are more opportunities for giving to the ministry of helps than perhaps any other aspect of Christian service. There are untold jobs, functions, and needs in a parish that await the willing volunteer to give a helping hand: church office workers, child care or nursery attendants, kitchen workers, fundraisers, repair and maintenance workers, committee members – in fact, almost any professional or avocational ability can find an outlet for service somewhere in parish life as a ministry to the church or community. The ministry of helps may also include those who give prayer support or who offer support services: taking burdens from those who are called to minister in a more direct way (such as praying for those involved in evangelism or babysitting for a Bible study leader or running errands for someone who needs the time for hospital calling, etc.).

Administration Ministries: Administration is to assume oversight for business or for the proper execution of an organization or program (being in charge of people or things). Those with administrative abilities

are needed to serve with the governing body of the church in order to assure the smooth operation of temporal functions of the church. Administrators are also needed to oversee the church office, to conduct stewardship campaigns, and to organize people for various church functions, projects, or programs. Financing, planning, organizing, delegating responsibilities, and problem-solving are all administrative functions.

Apostleship Ministries: An apostle is one "called out and sent forth." Anyone, who goes about spreading the gospel by word or deed or who ministers to others could be called an apostle.

In the truest sense of the word, however, apostles are those who receive a definite commission from the church authorities (or from the Lord) to work in a particular area of outreach beyond their usual sphere of influence. Such a commission might include helping to begin a new church or mission elsewhere, conducting a ministry for the poor or unchurched, in the community, or becoming involved in missionary or evangelistic activities beyond the church boundaries. Other examples might be starting a home for unwed mothers, working with widows or orphans, or providing ministry to inmates in a prison or to shut-ins. St. Paul, the apostle, devoted his life to missionary work - spreading the gospel and establishing and nurturing churches for new converts. Any such form of missionary outreach would be considered an apostolic ministry.

Evangelistic Ministries: An evangelist is one who spreads the "good news" about Jesus Christ. Evangelistic ministries include such things as witnessing, giving testimonies, visiting the unchurched or unsaved, giving offerings to assist in evangelistic work, sharing Bibles or books with an evangelistic emphasis, assisting with surveys or backing up witnessing efforts in a support capacity, taking evangelistic programs to prisons or other institutions, aligning oneself with evangelistic efforts through committees or organizations, and living a life that bears witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in the world. Every Christian is called to be a witness for Christ, and, therefore, should be involved in evangelism to a greater or lesser degree.

Pastoral Ministries: Pastoral care is the responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the body of Christ. Although this ministry is most usually a function of the clergy, the laity can assist with the oversight and care for the flock of Jesus Christ in supportive ways. One way is praying for and ministering to the clergy and being willing to assume duties they may delegate. Some churches have programs with appointed laypersons who assist in meeting the spiritual (and sometimes temporal) needs of the parish, some have deacons who fill this need, others have committees or individuals who work with the clergy in performing assigned tasks. Pastoral care, including parish calling, counseling, visitation, crisis assistance, and spiritual direction, could well become less burdensome for the clergy if there were effective lay ministries in operation - the entire congregation assuming responsibility for one another, being sensitive to the needs of one another, and becoming willing to meet the needs of one another.