



How Theology Impacts Ministry

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Introduction

This essay will explore how theology impacts ministry in the contexts of Scripture, leadership, and ministry. We will use Scripture as evidence. As our knowledge expands, the quality, purity, and reach of our personal bible reading, leadership, and ministries will be extended by, in, and through theology. The aim is to personally reflect on the question, “How will my knowledge of God impact the world?”

The use of logic, exegesis, history, and personal witness will show how theology has impacted ministry. This exploration will cover these three areas through an exegesis of Acts 6:1-6. This narrative speaks to the overall tone that is set for theology and ministry in the New Testament church. As evangelicals, our view of Scripture as authoritative is critical to understanding this chain of effects; Scripture should impact and inform theology, which in turn should impact and inform ministry, which is demonstrated most openly through (church) leadership. Scripture unveils these interdependencies while answering our primary question.

Scripture, being divinely inspired, God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), is always revealing the nature of God and His works. We must view this work, His Bible, and all of its contents in this context. Confining this discussion to our context will allow for a

presentation of various, differing views on the understanding of ministry. Nevertheless, surely there are overarching principles which can accent our objectives.

The example of the disciples in Acts 6:1-6 shows us that His Word is to be held in the highest esteem. Scripture was written primarily by leaders in ministry, and often about ministry. This specific passage in Acts displays that we are being led by, ministered to, and taught by God the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27). Although it is a narrative about ordination, this passage has a unique voice in the conversation because it shows the primacy of God's Word through the influence of the Holy Spirit.

It is in Scripture that we find Jesus's example of definitive and demonstrative leadership. The scriptural practice of Gospel ministry is the essence of discipleship. The ministry of reconciliation culminates in the multiplication of reconciling ministers (2 Corinthians 5:18-19).

Terms such as "good theology" and "bad theology" can be used to describe a broad spectrum of theological systems and ministry approaches. However, both are only to be scrutinized by scripture; for it is the standard of measurement. On many issues, differing interpretations may be simultaneously called Biblical or orthodox. Therefore, rather than emphasizing a conflict between schools of thought, we will hold everything under the light of Scripture.

Beginning with the highest leader and minister, Jesus, the God-man Himself, we will see His exhibition of perfect theology. We will also hear His repetitious, counter-cultural, other-worldly, God-glorifying understanding of ministry, leadership, and theology.

We will need working definitions of these major terms in question, theology and ministry. With such ranging fields of discourse, we must define what is meant by each term. From this point we can draw out larger principles which will carry into other of the countless concentric and overlapping circles of conversation and debate about these two themes and their intersection.

Theology Defined

First, let us deal with a false dichotomy. Theologians are mischaracterized too often by practitioners and vice versa. The aspiring theologian and/or minister's identity does not necessitate caricatures of the hermit or the heretic. John Piper addresses this in *The Pastor as Theologian: The Life and Ministry of Jonathan Edwards*. Piper asserts that if divinity is "left to a few academic theologians in the colleges and seminaries, while pastors all become technicians and managers and organizers...in the long run the gains will prove shallow and weak."¹

Dr. Albert Mohler Jr. in *The Pastor as Theologian* succinctly addresses that "Every pastor is called to be a theologian."² The gap between an exclusively academic and a purely pragmatic approach is unnecessary. Dr. Mohler references the examples of early church fathers, Irenaeus and Athanasius, who carried out both tasks. He shows us how devoid these ministry activities become without the proper attention given to the theological convictions that institute them.

¹ John Piper, *The Pastor as Theologian: The Life and Ministry of Jonathan Edwards* (<http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-pastor-as-theologian>)

² Dr. Albert Mohler Jr., *The Pastor as Theologian*, (<http://www.sbts.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2010/09/the-pastor-as-theologian.pdf>)

Expanding our understanding of theology includes a recognition of God's power to permeate all of life. Dr. John Frame has offered a working definition of theology as "the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life."³ To further this point, Lesslie Newbigin writes in *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*:

This withdrawal of theology from the world of secular affairs is made more complete by the work of biblical scholars whose endlessly fascinating exercises have made it appear to the lay Christian that no one untrained in their methods can really understand anything the Bible says. We are in a situation analogous to one about which the great Reformers complained. The Bible has been taken out of the hands of the layperson: it has now become the professional property not of the priesthood but of scholars.⁴

Newbigin reminds us of the priesthood of all believers. With the present-day wealth of biblical resources, the possibilities for deepening theological ventures and pioneering ministries are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the two are to be wed together in order to reach full potential.

Theology is the study of knowledge of God, which is often referred to as Theology [Proper]. The way Jesus talks about the Father and how He can be known is the truest form of theology and the most accurate methodology available. To know Jesus is to know God. In chapter 8 verses 18-19, John makes the claim by repeating the words of Jesus:

I am He who testifies about Myself, and the Father who sent Me testifies about Me." So they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor the Father; if you knew Me, you would know my Father also.

³ Dr. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1987), 76

⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1986), 142

Ministry Defined

Gathering a working definition of ministry is not altogether different from that of theology. The priesthood of all believers is the categorical broadening of our understanding of ministry. Ministers should permeate every segment of society through their work and in everyday living. Despite the nuances with such a broadly used term, ministry can be seen as the practice of carrying out one's beliefs, especially when meeting the needs of others.

Theology is the mother of ministry. The quality of theology determines whether it be the ministry of death or of life. Scriptural dependency through theology dictates the motives, choices, and actions of every theologian. Biblical ministry does not and cannot happen without having been conceived and delivered through theology.

The entanglement of the discussion comes if we confine ourselves to the usage of the word *ministry* only in Acts 6:1-6. The case could be made for *ministry* to be roles, offices, groups, or organized tasks, even within these few verses. In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Hermann W. Beyer states that *diakonia* which is translated as ministry in this passage can mean “waiting at table”.⁵ Beyer further explains that in verse 4 “the preaching of the Gospel is described as a ministry of the Word”⁶ and that the two are connected since “The Word of God is offered as the bread of life.”⁷

⁵ Hermann W. Beyer, “διακονία,” *TDNT* 2:87.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

Here is the two-sided explanation of practical activity and Scriptural preeminence. Beyer makes the claim that “service is oriented to the Gospel.”⁸ Later, Beyer notes that “the Seven are set alongside the Twelve as representatives of the Hellenists, and that they take their place with the evangelists and apostles in disputing, preaching, and baptizing.”⁹

Not only will ministry suffer greatly without intense concentration on the theological impulse, but conversely we must take note of the weakening of theological endeavors that produce no fruit. The gross overemphasis on this side can be theoretical impressions of divinity that raise no affections, actions, or the possibility for an application of either. For example, James 2:19-20 NASB “You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

Jesus repeatedly defines ministry and leadership like a refrain in the Gospels. He is letting the disciples know that He will not always be there. (John 8:21) He sends them out to do work. (Matthew 10; Luke 9) He also strategically sends larger crowds (Luke 10) and continues training as they return. Jesus knows the events and outcomes of these short excursions. He is modelling discipleship. Jesus clearly teaches them and us that we are to minister and lead. For example, Matthew 20:25-28 (NASB):

But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Hermann W. Beyer, “διακονία,” *TDNT* 2:90

This is the mode and style of leading He models. Jesus, eternally submitted to God the Father, became a perpetual servant sent as a missionary to His children that they through Him may become His own brothers.

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, He consistently and purposefully makes Himself the lowest. He physically stoops to save the adulteress. (John 8:2-11) He asks a Gentile adulteress to get water for him. (John 4:1-42) He receives financing for his ministry from women. (Luke 8:1-3) He washes feet. (John 13:1-17) He takes a beating. He never gets the last word in; because He is the Word. (John 1:1) He accepts the cross.

Jesus often retreated and taught His followers to do the same. Lesslie Newbigin points us to Jesus's example of sacrificial ministry and leadership by highlighting that a "life of prayer and daily consecration which remains hidden from the world but which is the place where the essential battles are either won or lost."¹⁰

Jesus's ministry brought an unprecedented paradigm shift through using a process of simple relational multiplication and leader servanthood. Jesus's beliefs impacted His actions. Ministry is the ethical result to theological conviction.

Exegesis of Acts 6:1-6

The first instance of the selection of leadership for a ministry duty in the New Testament church, post-Pentecost, is Acts 6. In the closing of chapter 5, we see the daily tasks of the apostles which is "preaching Jesus as the Christ". However, there were more tasks to be done, especially as their number grew. We will see the pre-eminence that

¹⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989), 240-241

these men placed on theology as they were led by the Holy Spirit, the example and commands of Jesus, and His Word.

This ministry grew out of a problem. Verse 1 NASB says, “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.” Instead of disputing, the twelve acknowledged the severity of the problem and their accountability before God to steward their time wisely by calling others to come know Him.

Their logic shows what they hold in highest regard, the Word of God. Verse 2 NASB states, “So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.” There is no intentional demeaning of this duty. Serving tables fell behind handling the Word of God, as if on a hierarchical platform.

The Apostles took into account the transgression of neglecting widows, but also accurately considered that neglecting God’s Word would cost them greater in eternity. Accountable to both God’s people and His Word, they resolved the concerns and in turn made room for even more growth. The impact on the community must have been considerable.

There are at least five significant principles regarding leadership in verses 3 and 4 NASB, “Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” First, there is the specificity of the

selection including an appropriate number of men to complete the task. Second, we see the qualifications of the men in character and Spirit. Third, the delegation of duties happens as they clearly and publicly pass this particular baton. Next, the organizational clarity of the Apostles is astounding; they move into the details and make the precise distinction of expectations between the two groups. Finally, there is the declaration that the joint ministry of prayer and the Word will take precedence in the newly formed church, the family of God. The conclusion of the initial sacred commission was the laying on of hands by the Apostles.

Stephen's survey of the Old Testament testifies to the caliber of men that were chosen as these first seven ministers. Luke identifies the theological depth and spiritual maturity of one of the seven just chosen. In the wake of the events surrounding the first Christian martyr, God moved. Saul's conversion led to the spread of the Gospel to the whole continent. Persecution caused networks of smaller churches to go underground for safety. Dispersion was catalytic to the rapid growth, and megachurches began to spring up in the pagan metropolitan areas.

Devotion to prayer and the Word did little to play a role in the spread from leadership to a whole group of people. It was solely the transformative power of God and his Word working through his people by these means. The focus is not the disciples' devotion to, but rather God rightly glorified and His revelation exalted by Him, through them, for His glory.

Other Examples

There are examples of the ministry of the Holy Spirit and the primacy of God's Word throughout the entire Bible, but here are a few of those instances from the New Testament. Where the Lord is lifted high, there is power, subversive, life-changing, movement-inciting power.

Galatians 2 is Paul's retelling of the confrontation he and Peter had about bigotry in leadership. Paul called Peter out, not of his own authority or power, but with the richness and vitality of the proclaimed truth of Jesus. That is an example of theology revolutionizing the way ministry leaders view other people groups and cultures, and therefore setting the precedent for gospel-centered ethnic inclusiveness in ministry.

3 John is a beautiful example of a faithful minister of the truth. When John praised Gaius, he said that he was "walking in the truth." His theology was evidenced in his life. John then spent the rest of the short letter, writing as an elder and foremost leader, showing right from wrong, and good from bad theology.

Demetrius and Gaius were both ministering life to him even through their testimony. Yet, on the other hand, Diotrephes is a minister of death and the truth of God demands his errors to be corrected. Grace breeds conflict, in a fallen world. The proclamation of God's Word breeds the men and women, boys and girls to handle such a ministry with grace. God has also supplied the tools in His revealed truth to carry out the Gospel-centered work of love.

We have these examples as evidence throughout most of the Pauline letters, specifically in his greetings and closings and their accompanying prayers. Paul repeatedly tells us of the unknown church leaders who were faithful in their love for God and His

people. Paul, as their father, reminded them time after time of their acceptance of the message of Christ when he was with them. This strengthened their convictions. They were reminded that they are a new people, born again in Christ. Because we are children of God, we must listen to what our Father says and be changed.

1 Timothy 1 includes one last extreme example of Paul revealing bad theology. He says verse 20 (NASB), “Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.” God will always make himself known, even in situations like this. These brothers have rejected the life-giving ministry of the Holy Spirit through the leadership of the ministers. However, Paul’s robust theology will not allow him to disavow them without a plea for their souls. We must execute the ministry of church discipline in such a way that it enhances our view of God.

Conclusion

The highest leader and minister, Jesus, the God-man Himself, exhibits perfect theology and perfect ministry. The Scripture is a collection of His counter-cultural, other-worldly, God-glorifying understanding of theology, ministry, and leadership. The scriptures show us how theology impacts ministry being a theological work of ministry by God Himself, in that He reveals Himself to us through Scripture.

In order to know what we ought to think about our Maker, we should ask Him. Prayerful theology is carefully holding scripture and fellowship with Christ in the Light of God’s Love and allowing him to shape what we think. Theology that enables us to run,

that is blazing in our hearts, that is white hot in our minds, that is what Jesus had and what He offers to us.

Jesus is the source of theology and ministry and has chosen to reveal Himself to us through Scripture. Now we are left with the scriptural mandate to carry out sound Biblical ministry which cannot exist without sound biblical theology. How could our knowledge of God not impact the world?

He is the greatest theologian, minister, and leader. We are always in need of Jesus's ministry. When we are hurting, he heals us. When we think we are not hurting, he reveals us to us. When we are lost, he guides us home. To know Jesus is to know God. Let God lead us to know Him more. Amen.

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