



The Commensalist Relationship Between Theology and Ministry

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Theology and ministry have always been closely tied together by the Holy Spirit. Throughout history there is no evidence of one being present without the other. However, theology has always preceded ministry by the slightest of margins. Ministry needs theology in order to exist. If an understanding of an aspect of God is not comprehended, by the Spirit's inspiration, then it will not be acted upon, by the leading of the Spirit. Therefore, theology must come before ministry. This is because theology and ministry have a commensalist relationship. Ministry is directly affected by theology and can both benefit and be harmed by it. Theology remains unaffected by ministry; the relationship has no reverse affects. So, if a theology exists then a ministry exists as well by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, if a theology does not exist then a ministry does not exist. In this way there are pros and cons to this commensalist relationship. Some areas of Christianity that are directly impacted by this relationship are our understanding of Scripture, the actions of our leaders, and the ministries of the Church. By looking specifically at disability theology it will become clear that the commensalist relationship between theology and ministry is one that needs to be clearly understood and appreciated in order for the Church to be fulfilling the role that Christ bestowed on it by being open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Commensalism

Before we delve into this it is necessary to clarify some terminology. The first term addressed will be commensalism. According to Webster's Dictionary, commensalism is "an animal living with another for support or sometimes for mutual advantage, but not as a parasite."¹ In regards to theology and ministry, this means that ministry is partnered with theology in order to gain support from it. There are advantages for the Church because of this relationship, but the only mutual advantage for them would be acknowledgement and popularity in the religious world. Theology cannot be harmed by ministry. However, harm can be unintentionally inflicted on ministry by theology. This is because if theology does not take place then ministry will not happen.² The opposite cannot be said because theology always originates just prior to ministry. Therefore, theology cannot be adversely affected by ministry.

Theology and Ministry

The final two terms that should be defined are theology and ministry. The understanding of theology that we will be working with is very basic: knowledge about God. This definition is easy enough to discover, it is the breakdown of the Greek θεός and the Latin *-logia*, literally meaning the study of God. Our definition of ministry will not be as simple.

The Greek word most often translated as ministry is διακονία. The reason for searching the Greek is to try to gain an understanding of what Jesus meant and expects

¹ Noah Webster, *Webster's Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* (New York, NY: The Publishers Guild, 1947), 343.

² Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014), 136.

ministry to be (2 Corinthians 5:17-20). This word is also translated as ‘serving,’ ‘waiting,’ ‘attending,’ ‘relief’ and ‘a commission’ in its thirty six appearances in the New Testament.³ With all of its translations there is an emphasis on aiding someone, on being concerned for someone who you care about. This means there is an aspect of action to this word. More than this, *διακονία* is the combination of caring with missions.⁴ In this way ministry must be composed of both compassion and outreach. It must have elements of evangelism and loving your neighbor. Therefore, the relationship between theology and ministry is one of progression, from knowledge to action.

Once an aspect of God has been understood, theology, that idea can then be applied to life and actively lived out, ministry. Augustine wrote, “No one can love what he does not know.”⁵ Action cannot be taken without a cause. Therefore, ministry does not happen without theology giving it its *telos*. In this way theology and ministry have a commensalist relationship.

Negative aspect of Commensalism

³ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 138.

⁴ Gottlob Schrenk, “*διακονία*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. By Gerhard Kittel, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Company, 2006), 88.

⁵ Augustine, *De Trinitate*; quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa of the Summa* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1990), ed. by Petre Kreeft, 437.

Clearly there can be issues with this one way relationship. As mentioned, if there is no theology then there is no ministry. This means not only that an aspect of God has not been understood and studied, but an aspect of the commission God has given humanity is not being lived out as He intends it to be. The example that we will use throughout the rest of this paper as evidence for this is disability theology.⁶ For a number of reasons the theology of the disabled has been widely forgotten, due to perceived lack of importance, fame, or other factors. Because of this there has not been appropriate disability ministry within the Church. With theology forgetting about the disabled, the Church has largely forgotten about them as well. It is only fairly recently that some have raised their voices and are calling for a disability theology to be developed so that the Church can adequately serve those who have disabilities.⁷ In this way, sometimes a need for ministry is recognized before the theology is developed. However, the ministry still cannot successfully begin before the theology has been developed. This is not the only

⁶ The reason I have chosen disability theology is because it is an area of study that I believe has not been given the attention that it should have. Any marginalized theology or people group could be substituted for the disabled. There is no underlying reason for the distinguishing of the disabled.

⁷ Church of England, "Resourcing Ministerial Education," *Ministry Development*, 2006 [document on-line]; available from http://www.ministrydevelopment.org.uk/resourcing_ministerial_education; Internet; accessed 17 January 2016.

detriment to theology and ministry's commensalist relationship. Another aspect of Christianity that is negatively impacted by this is Scripture.

Scripture

Because the theology of the disabled has largely been disregarded, Scripture has not been read in a way that ministers to the disabled. This means that not only has a ministry not been enacted to care for and reach the disabled, an understanding of God that is explicitly relevant to the disabled community has not been established. The disabled therefore have been trying to interpret Scripture through the eyes of someone who does not accurately understand them. They are preached at by clergy who do not know how to make the Gospel relevant to them. They read the Bible through the lens of the physically and mentally capable because that is how they were taught. How has this not been recognized as an issue before? The disabled cannot be cared for as Christ is calling us to because we have no teaching on how to care for them. The first thing that needs to be done is to develop a theology. After this a ministry to the disabled will be established. Then the disabled can be cared for as they deserve, as human beings, created in the image of God.

This being said, reading Scripture through the eyes of the disabled is an act of theology. Therefore, while ministry comes after theology, Scripture is an aspect of theology. Only by studying Scripture can a theology begin to be developed about anything. This is evident with disability theology. After a careful reading of Scripture a concept starts to form about what such a theology might be. After further contemplation, and potentially problem solving, a modest theology appears. Scripture is one of the building blocks of theology. Therefore, its impact on ministry cannot be taken lightly and

its influence on the lives of those it affects cannot be overlooked, as it has been with disability theology.

Emulation through Leadership and Ministry

The Church is the body of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). The Church is also called to emulate the life of Christ (Matthew 5:48). While it is good to understand aspects of God, if these aspects are not acted upon they are pointless (James 1:22). God does not call us to think about Him, but to live Him out every day of our lives (1 Corinthians 8:6).

In order for the Church to grasp a ministry and pour forth their passion and love into it, the theology must first exist. This must be developed through leaders that see a depravity that needs to be addressed and seek to do something about it. First, they must understand what God is calling them to do about it, pursuing theology. After this step is taken, a plan for ministry can be developed to actually meet the need. In this way leadership is also needed for that ministry. If no one steps up and takes charge then nothing will be done even if the theology does exist. In this way theology and ministry both need leadership. If no one recognizes that a need is being neglected then no one will see a need to do anything about it. But if that need is observed, then a theology must be developed. If this is a new need then the theology must be pioneered in the sense that the theologian(s) are the first to break ground in a specific realm of God's love. By doing this the theologian(s) are leading the way and calling people to listen and accept what they have discerned about the character of God and how He is calling humanity to live. Following the establishment of theology, leaders in ministry are needed. Often times the

kinds of people who establish theology are not the kinds of people who are good at developing an effective ministry. Because of this new leaders must step up and answer the call that Christ has commanded to provide care and love for our brothers and sisters of humanity. This is how ministry also needs leaders. If no one takes the initiative to live out God's love to a particular demographic, then no one will. Ministry needs trend setters and people who are passionate about emulating Christ by loving humanity.

Emulating Christ is an act of leadership. Whether this is in terms of trying to gain a deeper understanding of the character of God or living out that new knowledge, it takes courage and someone who is willing to be the first one down the path, preparing the way for more to follow in loving as Christ loved us. Because of this, theology and ministry only happen when leaders recognize their calling and seek to remain faithful to God by living out that calling. Therefore, while theology is the basis for ministry, neither of these happens without leaders answering the call. In this way, without the moving of the Holy Spirit within the hearts and lives of Christians, no leaders will recognize their calling. Because of this it is logical then to assert that without leaders there is no theology, and therefore no ministry. So then, the moving of the Spirit is the cause of all leaders, and subsequently all theology and ministry.⁸ In this way God is the origin of all acts of love performed by the Church.

Implications for the Church Today

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1936-77), I. I. 295.

Now we will return to the illustration provided through disability theology to answer the question, what does the commensalist relationship between theology and ministry mean for the Church today? To begin to answer this question we will review what we have just discovered through our exploring: the Holy Spirit is needed to inspire leaders to first study theology and then to engage in ministry.

The Church needs to be open to the moving of the Spirit within the lives of its leaders if any theology is going to be done, and subsequently, any ministry. If no one pays attention to what the Spirit is guiding them to then no theology will occur. If the Spirit is not active and moving within the study of God, then what is the point? It becomes the same as studying anything else, for purely scholarly purposes. The only thing that separates the study of God from the study of anything else is the intimate, soulful interaction between the subject and the object, us and God.⁹ Therefore, in order for more in depth study to be done on the character of God, the Holy Spirit must be allowed to work and move and inspire.

In regards to disability theology this means recognizing that God has a heart for all people, including those whom He created with limitations. Once the Spirit has revealed the connection between God and the disabled, theology can begin. At this point the Spirit is still prevalent in stirring up passions within leaders who can enter into Scripture in order to attempt to be able to explain what this connection looks like and how this gives us a fuller understanding of the character of God. Currently there are not a

⁹ While this does illustrate the point I am making, I am aware that it does not do justice to the nature of God as so much more than an object.

lot of people who are studying this, who have felt the Spirit move within them guiding them to address this issue. This is the first step that must be recognized for the disabled. There are numerous pastors and ministry leaders who are seeking guidance on how they can best minister to the disabled, but who have no idea. The theology must first be done. While this is only the second step on the journey from theology to ministry, even this has not yet been overcome. It remains an obstacle that must be overcome today. One could even make the argument that the first step, in allowing the Spirit to move and inspire, has not even been realized yet due to the lack of disability theologians in the world today.

Because of this, the analogy to disability theology can go no further. There is a significant lack of disability ministries within the church today. A simple Google search of “Christian disability organizations” would appear to contradict this by the 12.3 million results. However upon further research, the first four links lead to the same two websites, and even these websites have links to each other. Even more than this, all of the links on the first page do not have ministries for the disabled, but for care takers of disabled individuals. There is still limited outreach being given directly to the disabled even with the organizations already present.

This in turn is caused by the lack of theology being done in this area. Some may argue that this is not valid. After all, institutions such as Duke Divinity School, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Moody Bible Institute all offer classes on disability ministry. This cannot be refuted. However, when this issue is delved into deeper it is clear that this is not the full truth. While all of these schools do offer one class on disability, they offer far more classes in other areas of ministry that have been traditionally been discriminated by the church, including racism and sexual orientation. It has been contended that this

shortage of theology is caused by the lack of people responding to the moving of the Spirit within them. Arguing that the Spirit is not moving is invalid (Romans 8:5). People simply are not answering.

This returns us to the idea at the beginning of this section, the inspiration of the Spirit. Churches today need to be open to the moving of the Spirit within its members. If someone has a passion to start a particular ministry, go to the Bible. Study what God says about that issue and do what it says. But, you cannot do anything within being open and surrendered to the Spirit. This is a duty and responsibility of the Church today: encourage awareness of the Spirit's moving and follow through on that moving. If this occurs, then more theology will be done in order for more ministries to happen and the Church will achieve its *telos* by living out the commission given by Christ.

Conclusion

Theology needs ministry, and ministry needs theology. Neither can exist without the other. Theology by itself is just knowledge.¹⁰ Ministry by itself is unguided action. But together they provide care and outreach to various groups of people. However, this only happens if the Spirit moves within people and these movements are accepted. If the Spirit moves and people do not listen, nothing will happen. Leaders must accept their call and act. Theology must be done. Scripture must be interpreted and understood. Ministry must be acted upon. If any one of these does not happen, ministry ultimately fails, as we

¹⁰ John Rowan Claypool IV, "Theology of ministry," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 15 (Spring 1973): 3.

see with the disabled. But, if all of these happen in accordance with the moving of the Spirit, ministry succeeds.¹¹ In this way theology and ministry have a commensalist relationship because while theology cannot be harmed by ministry not taking place, ministry is not successful without theology and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

¹¹ Kathleen A. Calahan, "Toward a fundamental theology of ministry," *Worship* 80 (March 2006): 104.

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