

Servants or Masters

of the Word?

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'I love study and I love giving talks' said the eager young man across the table at the interview. 'In fact, I can hardly wait to get into the ministry.' But my colleague pulled him up short, with a very penetrating question. 'And do you equally love the people you speak to?' Eventually, the reply came, 'Well...I hope so'. I hope so too!

The danger of reductionism

Sometimes our views of Biblical ministry, Word-shaped and Word-centred as they are and must be, tend to be more reductionist than the apostles would own. Our vocabulary gives us away. Whereas past generations spoke of 'ministering (serving) God's Word', we often speak of 'teaching the Bible'. Of course we are to teach, and what we are to teach is the Bible; the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. You can hardly miss that emphasis on page after page of the New Testament. But the apostles were not only interested in the 'what', but in the 'how', and I fear that we may be in danger of forgetting that.

'Congregations are not passive buckets to be pumped into' is a maxim I was taught many years ago, though I don't now remember its origin. Yet when the emphasis is *exclusively* on getting the content right and as me as the 'teacher', I detect that we are not following fully in the apostles' footsteps, or those of their Lord and ours. The hearers have become merely part of the 'event', but what relationship exists between us? Are they just a target audience, a necessary end-point for teaching? It's always interesting to put the question, 'What do you teach?' to professional school-teachers. Some say 'geography', and some say '10-year olds'. There can be a world of difference of outlook and practice hidden in those different answers, and the same is true of teachers in the church.

Truth and love for real people

For Paul, truth and love were inextricably joined together. In fact, he describes the ministry of Christians towards one another as (literally) 'trudging in love' (Eph 4:15). The very purpose of gospel freedom is to 'serve one another in love', since 'the entire law is summed up in a single command:

‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Gal 5:13-14). ‘Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up’ (1 Cor 8:1). Or, think of the whole argument of 1 Cor 13 for the supremacy of love. No wonder, then, that his testimony about his own ministry constantly reflects this emphasis. ‘We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us (1 Thess 2:7-8). Or again, ‘For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake’ (2 Cor 4:5). This same conjunction of truth and love is equally central to the apostle John's ministry, as the twin emphases of his first letter that ‘God is light’ and ‘God is love’ make abundantly clear (1 Jn 1:5, 4:8, 16).

So, whose servants are *we*? The very term ‘ministry’ makes clear that we cannot be serving ourselves. Full-time Christian work is not an ivory-tower for the intellectually able, a sort of evangelical scholasticism, in which real church members with real needs in their real lives, and real sinners whose lives are in a real mess, become an unwanted, frustrating distraction from my ‘teaching ministry’. There may be a place in academic research for such people, but they should not clutter up the ministry. Don't go into Christian ministry unless you love people as Jesus does, and are prepared to give your life in costly service (their servants, for His sake), as Jesus did.

Scripture: a personal revelation for a personal relationship

Someone commented to me recently that they hear a lot in conservative evangelical circles about loving and serving the Truth, or the Gospel, but comparatively little about loving and serving the Lord. Of course, we can side-step that challenge by saying that Christ is the gospel and the gospel is Christ, crucified and risen. But that is not the issue. The way we express what we are doing does indicate our priorities and perceptions, and there will always be a danger for those who have a message of absolute Truth to become mechanistic in its proclamation. The point is that the gospel itself is totally relational. Being a Christian is entering into a living relationship with the creator of the universe--nothing less than you ‘in Christ’ and ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’ (Col 1:27).

To reduce this personal relationship with God to a series of doctrinal formulations, however rich and deep (and they are!), is to miss the most telling dimension of its experience. It is also to misunderstand the nature of Scripture. For the Bible was never intended to be taught with a factual textbook approach to the knowledge of God, but as a means of personal encounter with God Himself. The very essence of the Bible is that it is relational--God reveals Himself to us and requires a response from us, a response of love to Him which involves every part of our being and which overflows in love to others (Matthew 22:37-40). Scripture is designed to bring us into that living relationship and then to sustain and nurture it, to feed us with the bread of life. It cannot be properly taught like a history textbook, where the transmission of information is the major goal. It has to be taught relationally, with warmth and application pointing out its life-changing significance, the purpose for which it was given, or we fail to teach it properly. And it has to be taught in a way that connects with our hearers and helps them at the deepest levels of their lives, or we do not really love them.

It all depends on whom we are really serving. Is it an idol of our 'ministry', by which we all too easily end up serving ourselves? Or are we 'your servants, for Jesus' sake'? When love for Him and love for people dominate and energise us, Word ministry catches fire and begins to change both the church and the world. Where that is absent, we might do better to be silent.