

**Ideas Have Consequences:
A Brief Review of the Relationship Between Thought and Practice**

Dr. Dominic A. Aquila

This is an assessment and observations of the Rocky Mountain Presbytery decision on the use of the title "minister" that was debated on April 27, 2007. The perspective in this assessment comes from one who supported the main motion.

The motions before RMP were the following; the substitute motion was adopted:

Main motion:

That the Presbytery acknowledge that the title "minister" as used in the BCO is synonymous with "pastor" and "teaching elder," and as such none of these titles may be used to refer to any but ordained teaching elders.

Substitute motion:

That the Presbytery acknowledge that the title "minister" as used in the BCO is synonymous with "pastor" and "teaching elder," however, that it also acknowledge that the title "minister" has been used in a general or generic manner and in this general way can be used for unordained church staff members.

In light of the discussion and the adoption of the substitute motion, the following observations are offered.

1. There is an ecclesiastical egalitarian spirit prevalent in the church (as opposed to a gender egalitarianism, referring to the equality between men and women). This spirit is the notion that every believer must be on an equal footing. There is a certain emotional appeal, as opposed to a rational one, that no one in the church should be over anyone else, or appear more important than anyone else. This is an anti-clerical spirit, a notion that was even used a number of times in the course of the debate.

Using the categories often used for explaining the Trinity, we can affirm that there is an equality of essence and also a functional distinction between members of the church. There is an ontological equality that all believers enjoy where there is the same essence and value in each believer. However, there are also the economic distinctions that exist between believers by virtue of their particular calling and placement in the church. Just as we speak of the Persons in the triune God as being ontologically equal in power and glory and also recognize their functional distinctions, so we see this analogy of God's self-revelation expressed in human relationships. Ecclesiastical egalitarianism focuses mainly, if not exclusively, on the ontological equality without giving much deference to the economic and functional distinctions. The result of this faulty notion is confusion of roles and functions and an expectation that all members of the church can engage in any and all ministry functions.

2. There is a lack of recognizing the distinctions between the special office gifts and the general office of believers. In the debate, a number of speakers referred to Ephesians 4:11-12. Both the special office and the general office are spoken of side-by-side. Verse 11 focuses on the special office gifts Christ gave when ascended on high: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. Notice the construction of the sentence, that the definite article "tous" is used before each office (και αυτος εδωκεν **τους μεν** αποστολους **τους δε** προφητας **τους δε** ευαγγελιστας **τους δε** ποιμενας και διδασκαλους). This construction makes it clear that Paul was not referring to offices in a generic sense, but was referring to those offices established by Christ and given by him as gifts to the church. The unique place of these offices is emphasized further when Christ gave the special office gifts of apostle and prophet to the church. Paul stated that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). These office gifts would be comparable to the special office gifts that were given to the Old Testament church: prophet, priest and king.

One example of the distinction between the offices of prophet, priest and king is found in II Chronicles 26:16-20, where we read about King Uzziah, who sought to assume to himself a task that had been reserved for the priests. Note this verse as especially instructive in highlighting the distinction between the offices of priest and king:

They [the priests in the temple] confronted him and said, "It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the Lord God" (v. 18).

This principle of special office gifts is the same under the old covenant as well as the new covenant. Christ gave the office gifts to the church and they are distinguished from the general gifts for the general office of believers. Those given the special office gifts are responsible to train, prepare and equip the members (general office) for the works of ministry, service or deaconing (εις εργον διακονιας). The "work of ministry, service or deaconing" is a function ("work") not a title. The focus in Ephesians 4:11-12 is on Christ giving office gifts to the church to the end that they would prepare the people of God for works of ministry, service or deaconing.

However, if the emphasis is placed primarily on what is said in v. 12, then ministry/service/deaconing will be seen through an ecclesiastical egalitarian template, with at least one result of διακονιας being interpreted as an office and not as a function.

One of our tendencies as humans is to disparage or question those placed in positions above us. For example, the lack of recognizing distinctions of office gifts and their place among God's people is seen in the account of Korah's rebellion, where Moses and Aaron were challenged with regard to the offices or positions they were exercising:

They [Korah and 250 Israelite men] came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Num 16:3).

Note the assumptions here: The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Read this to mean that there are no distinctions, everyone is equally holy and God is equally present with each one. By what right do Moses and Aaron place themselves over the rest of the holy ones? Moses and Aaron had not placed themselves above the Lord's assembly; they had been called and gifted for their respective offices and their responsibility was to fulfill their offices in a faithful way by serving the Lord before the people.

3. There is confusion in understanding the relationship between Scripture and the Westminster Standards. The PCA believes that Scripture is the absolute authority for the church. However, it is important to note that the PCA has adopted a hermeneutical framework by which it understands Scripture. As a confessional church its members have agreed together to interpret Scripture within a certain framework. Note the following:

The *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechisms* of the Westminster Assembly, together with the formularies of government, discipline, and worship are accepted by the Presbyterian Church in America **as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture** in relation to both faith and practice (BCO 29-1) [emphasis added].

While affirming that the Scripture is "the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined" (*WCF* 1.10), and that the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America is "subordinate to the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, the inerrant Word of God" (*BCO* Preface, III), and while affirming also that this Constitution is

fallible (*WCF* 31.3), the Presbyterian Church in America affirms that this subordinate and fallible Constitution has been “adopted by the church” (*BCO* Preface, III) “**as standard expositions of the teachings of Scripture** in relation to both faith and practice” (*BCO* 29-1) and as setting forth a form of government and discipline “in conformity with the general principles of biblical polity” (*BCO* 21-5.3) (*BCO* 39-3) [emphasis added].

“Do you sincerely receive and adopt the *Confession of Faith* and the *Catechisms* of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures...” (PCA Ordination Vow 2)

Scripture is the absolute authority for the church. This is not the issue. The PCA is a confessional church and as such its officers have agreed together that the Westminster Standards are a faithful or standard exposition of the Scriptures. A confession by definition includes and excludes by the system it has chosen to understand and interpret Scripture.

For example, the PCA confesses that the visible church membership is composed of professing believers and their children; this is its understanding of the Scripture's teaching on the covenant. Professing believers holding to a Baptist understanding of the covenant would not agree with this definition of the visible church; they would not present their infant children for baptism or see them as non-communing members of the visible church. As a result, Baptist believers could not affirm the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards. This same principle could be applied to professing believers who hold to an Arminian interpretation of soteriology. Ministers holding these views could not take the second ordination vow in the PCA. This does not mean these men are not professing believers or ministers of the gospel; it just means that they hold to another hermeneutical and confessional interpretation of Scripture.

Pitting Scripture against the Standards may sound clever, but this line of thinking misunderstands the relationship of Scripture and the Standards. To say that the Standards have been raised over Scripture is not what the Standards affirm and is a faulty assertion. It is more likely a tacit, if not explicit, admission that there is a disagreement over what constitutes our basis for unity. And this may be a reflection of a variance in one's views with the interpretation of Scripture that is presented in the Standards. If one believes that the Standards have not interpreted Scripture correctly, that its hermeneutical approach needs to be changed, then he has the right to propose amendments and let the church through deliberative assembly determine the matter. In this way, the Standards will continue to serve the church as the faithful and standard exposition of Scripture.

4. There is a lack of trust of historical precedence or theological precision. While there is a general appreciation and commitment to Reformed theology, its language and concepts are perceived as being too narrow and restrictive. It is interesting to observe, however, that those concerned about restrictive language have their own precision for issues that they believe are important to them. That which is called old is dismissed as "tradition," which allows for this tradition to be set aside for supposedly more modern language and constructs. Neither that which is perceived to be old or new is better than the other. History teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun, that we do stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, that we can learn from the past, that history does not begin with our own generation, that not all things old are bad, and that not all things new are good. Disparaging the past and distrusting theological precision will not produce a healthy perspective for Christian living or the practice of ministry.

5. There is a faulty understanding of the relationship of the gospel and culture. There is a proper relationship between the gospel and culture, but while we must be culturally aware and sensitive we cannot allow culture to dictate the church's agenda. The church's mission is grounded in objective, supernatural revelation. God has spoken authoritatively through the Scripture, which is his written Word. Jesus Christ is the final Word from God and reveals the fullness of God's redemptive plan (Lk. 24:27, 44-45; Heb. 1:1-2).

At base, ministry is either theologically or sociologically driven. If sociologically driven ministry begins with and is focused on the latest cultural movements, literature, art, ideas and fads. The latest norms are important determinatives of strategies for ministering to culture. The difficulty with this approach is that churches have to keep up continually with the ever changing cultural shifts and adjust their ministries accordingly. The so called seeker emphasis in ministry flows from this approach; that is, the felt needs of seekers drive the way ministry is structured.

The theological approach begins with a biblical anthropology that asserts that human thoughts and behaviors are the same in every generation, and while there are cultural issues that must be considered, the strategies for ministry are grounded on biblical principles. Since all human beings are sinners and are in rebellion against God, they are not seekers in the sense that they are able to initiate a search for God.

Paul's ministry to culture was grounded in the theology he wrote about in Romans 1:18-32: All human beings are godless and wicked, they suppress the truth by their wickedness, they know God by what he has revealed, but they refuse to believe him or his truth. Left to themselves they are without excuse. This deep seated spiritual condition undergirds the variety of shifting cultural expressions. Ministry begins, not with the shifting cultural expressions, but with the biblical anthropology that defines the true nature of human beings and culture.

We need to study our culture before we speak to our culture. That is, we study our culture in order to determine its conceptual ideas, language, idioms, and forms of application. This study is not done in order to acquiesce, capitulate, or agree with the cultural norms. It is done so that we will know how to address or speak the gospel into the specifics of these norms. The truth of the gospel's message does not change from culture to culture. The wording or style of the gospel's truth spoken in specific contexts may take on different applications but the truth itself does not change.

Whether Paul spoke to a primarily Jewish or Gentile audience, the main focus of his message was grounded in his biblical anthropology with specific applications directed to the respective circumstances of his audience. The culture did not set his ministry philosophy, the Scriptures did. Compare Paul's preaching to different audiences in Acts 13 and Acts 17.

In Acts 13 Paul spoke to a Jewish audience in Pisidian Antioch. His message was an exposition of Old Testament redemptive history, which came to its fullness in Christ. Note Paul's appeal to this audience:

"We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus ... But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses ... When the congregation was dismissed, many of the Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who talked with them and urged them to continue in the grace of God (Acts 13: 32-43).

In Acts 17, Paul was in a totally different cultural context. We read, "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (v. 16). But even though this secular, idol-dominated culture was so contrary to the gospel, Paul's message was centered in Christ and not dictated by that culture. Note this comment from some of Paul's audience regarding his message: "A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbling trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." **They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection**" (v. 18, emphasis added).

While the structure of the Paul's message to this secular audience was different than the structure to a primarily Jewish audience, both messages were centered in Christ and his redemptive work.

When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." At that, Paul left the Council. A few men became followers of Paul and believed. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others (Acts 17:32-34).

The preaching of the cross, honestly and truthfully presented, will always be offensive to culture; it confronts sinners with issues that offend their sensibilities (I Cor. 1:18-31). However, the preaching of the cross, no matter how offensive to culture, is the church's mandate and cannot be amended, toned down or made palatable.

The church is a supernaturally created institution, it was purchased by the blood of Christ, it is distinct from other institutions in culture, it lives under the laws of Christ, and it receives its mandate for ministry from Christ to display the riches of his grace to sinners. There are ideas and practices in the church that are unique to it because of revelation that do not fit the shifting ideas and practices of culture. When there are definitional differences or questions of application to issues between the church and its culture, the church looks first to biblical revelation to determine its ideas and practices. We have to be careful not to capitulate to the prevailing cultural norms, thinking that this will give us a better opening for the gospel.

6. There is a faulty appeal to "we have always done it this way." It is asserted that since the title "minister" has been used in a general way from the beginning of the PCA, it must be valid. This is a *de facto* argument, that is, that a matter must be true by the very fact that it has been used for a long time. This is legislation by default, very much like how a state may recognize common law marriages: Do something long enough and it will then be considered legal by the weight of "oral tradition." This is not the way that laws are made or followed. Since this is an argument from "tradition," a word and concept that a number claim is not reliable, it is interesting that this is even used as an argument (see the point above about questioning "tradition"). The more appropriate way to bring change in that which is clearly a part of the church's documents, is to propose amendments so that the church can deliberate on these issues.

As this assessment was being written, a question was posed about baptism, especially regarding who could administer this sacrament. Turning to Westminster Confession of Faith 28.2 we read the following:

The outward element to be used in this sacrament is water, wherewith the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, **by a minister of the Gospel, lawfully called thereunto** [emphasis added].

As a confessional church, the PCA believes that the proper administrators of the sacraments are "ministers of the Gospel," men who have been lawfully called thereunto, that is, set apart to the office by ordination. This is the language to which we have bound ourselves as a confessional church, and until there is a formal change through the deliberative process, this is the language that we should use and that should direct how we function in the church.

Dominic Aquila
Minister (ordained) of the Gospel