Ministry in Context

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The recent report of the "Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry in the Reformed Church in America" has placed the office of minister of Word and Sacrament on the table for fresh discussion. Preparation for ministry is not a new issue. The separation of the American church from its Dutch parent in 1771 turned on the issue of education for ministry. Ecclesiastical assemblies have worried about it ever since. One can read of the concern for the education, conduct, competency, examination, and supply of ministers throughout Reformed history. Nor is this a concern of assemblies only. Understandably, the local congregation cares intensely about those who not only stand in its pulpit, but whose character, learning, passions, and abilities deeply influence the life of the congregation and affect the spiritual well-being of its members.

It is the burden of this article to reflect on the nature of the office from a Reformed perspective. First, I shall consider the concept of office in general. Then, I shall focus on the particular office of minister of Word and Sacrament.

I shall contest a fairly recent change in the understanding of the ministerial office. In 1974, the Reformed Church in America amended its Book of Church Order (BCO) to define the office as functional in nature:

The office of the minister in the local parish is to serve as pastor, teacher, and enabler of the congregation, to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world.

The definition concludes by detailing the task of enabler:

As enabler the minister so serves and lives among the congregation that together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world.

I shall argue that this definition muddies the Reformed understanding of the office and thus has had deleterious consequences for our understanding of both the office and the church.

I begin with the notion of office. Reformed church order can be outlined as an ordering of (1) offices, and (2) assemblies. The church is ruled by offices that gather in assemblies. In a general sense, it has been rightly claimed that all
church members participate in the "office of the believer." Still, certain persons are set aside, or ordained, to particular offices; in the Reformed church the offices are three (or four): ministers of Word and Sacrament, elders, deacons, (and professors of theology). 3

Whence derive these offices? The Heidelberg Catechism, in A. 54, confesses that

... the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith.

It is Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, who rules the church. The Belgic Confession further adumbrates that claim when it states:

... that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word. There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments. There should also be elders and deacons, along with the pastors, to make up the council of the church (Art. 30).

The offices, then, derive from the fundamental office of Christ. Christ governs the church through the human instrument.

The office gives expression to a fundamental claim about the church. The church is called into being as it is addressed by God. The Word is the living communication from God that creates a people, no less than it created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1, John 1). The church exists only as God’s newly created community, a human body that lives by the grace of the God who calls forth and elects a people to God’s service in the world.

As such, the office does not and cannot emerge in a primary sense from the institutional gathering that is the church. Church order debates often circle the question whether the church is built from the "bottom up," from the gathered people, or from the "top down," from a divinely instituted authority. The view of office as rooted in the actuality of God’s call does not allow for a notion of office as emerging from the local congregation. The office articulates an understanding of authority. The church’s authority comes from the God who stands over and against the congregation.

Put another way, the church lives by the authority of the One who came to serve. A.J. Bronkhorst put it that way when he articulated Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians. It was a scandal to the Corinthians who could not accept the way of the cross as the way of obedience. 4 The human community understandably resists the way that to all appearances would lead to its dissolution.
This is startlingly contemporary. One need only sit with ecclesiastical committees to hear Christians struggling to plan the future of a dwindling church. When officers are viewed as representatives of a congregation, they strive to reflect the various interests, to formulate plans that will please the greatest number, to carve out a share of the "religious market." Ministers especially risk their future when they dare to stand against the congregational culture, a culture often enough reflective of wider cultural movements and trends.

When we say office, then, we indicate something essential for the life of the church. Notice that we have not used the term ministry (except in the possible confusion with "ministers of Word and Sacrament"). Christ calls believers to many different ministries within the church: e.g., teachers, singers, counselors, sextons, and youth leaders. Their ministry is valuable. How can we overrate teachers who educate children in the story that will shape their lives? However crucial or essential their ministry, its importance is derivative of the essential creation by God who gives life to the congregation. It is God who through Word and Spirit, "gathers, protects, and preserves" the church.

That said, more must be added. Notice, first, that we have been discussing offices. Office stands in contradistinction to officeholders. The officeholder is one who resides within the office. The notion of Christ ruling the church through the officeholder would turn us to an episcopal understanding of the church that rests on a notion of infused or inhabiting grace. The officeholder, the bishop, is so imbued with God's grace that he or she is authorized to lead the church on God's behalf. A Reformed understanding of grace is more dynamic, more relational if you will. Grace occurs in the event of God's intercourse with the human, and office in the general sense indicates a human receptivity to God's gracious leading. The offices, in the particular sense, not only gather to govern, but also prepare to be alert for the all-too-human distortion that a particular officeholder might bring.

That leads to a second reflection on the Reformed understanding of office. No office, by itself, reflects Christ's governance. In fact, when we read the Catechism's claim that the Son of God gathers, protects, and preserves through his Word and Spirit, we can understand that the Spirit works in manifold ways. The offices reflect this reality in their variations. We hold to three distinct offices: minister of Word and Sacrament, elder, and deacon. Our parity of ministry makes the strong claim that no one of these offices can by itself represent Christ's rule. The Liturgy reflects this understanding when it states: "By bringing together the offices of pastor, elder, and deacon, the consistory continues the full ministry of Christ in our day."

When we regard the variety of offices, we see one place where the 1974 shift in definition of the minister in the local parish began to go wrong. For it is not the minister's task to "build up and equip the whole church for its ministry
in the world." Nor is it his or her vocation to serve and live in the congregation that "together they become wholly devoted to the Lord Jesus Christ in the service of the church for the world." To claim this as the minister's primary task is to invade the particular offices of elder and deacon. The minister's particular commission as servant of the Word is to proclaim the church's mission as it emerges from the living Word, and to participate in the life of the consistory, classes, and synods to the extent that the gathered offices do so.

A third reflection turns on the question of "status" of the offices. The 1974 amendment reflected a well-founded fear of viewing the minister, particularly, as a holder of an office that gave him or her a higher status within the church. One hears repeatedly a complaint of "dominocracy" in the annals of the nineteenth-century Netherlands Reformed Church. The change in the BCO in 1974 added a new paragraph to the Preamble that included this sentence:

Third, the ecclesiastical offices which the Reformed Church deems necessary for its ordering are understood to be essentially functional in nature, and the term "office" is everywhere viewed in terms of service rather than status.7

The phrase, "rather than status," was later dropped, but its original inclusion betrays the motive for the amendment.

Behind the change is a common discussion whether an office is to be understood "functionally" or "ontologically." The latter term signifies that something alters in the being, the fundamental humanity, of the officeholder. The elder, say, becomes a sort of human being whereby the property of "eldership" becomes part and parcel of the structure of her human essence. When that happens, says the argument, we have created a new class of persons within the congregation. And this class will be viewed hierarchically: the elder or deacon or minister carries a higher "status." He or she lives "closer to God," as it were, and others need to honor and give precedence to such persons. That would violate not only the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers, but the Reformers' understanding of vocation as well.

I argue, on the other hand, that a bifurcation of function and ontology is false. It reflects a Greek understanding of ontology that views being in terms of "substance." Aristotle's discussions of the "essence" or "being" of the human are familiar to students of philosophy. What is it without which a creature is no longer a human? Is it reason? Is it bipedality? Is it consciousness? Is it language? Likewise, what makes a tree to be a tree, or red to be red, or a minister to be a minister? From this perspective, one might argue that persons, on ordination, were so "stamped" by grace that their humanity was changed and they became different human beings.

But that is not the only way to understand ontology. The authors of the 1974 change were correct when they articulated ministry in terms of service.
We are back where we started, viewing office from its foundational office, that of Christ. For Christ was the one who came not to be served, but to serve. Service is not a predicate that one carries with oneself; it articulates an action, a function if you will. While we may call a person a "servant," we do so only because the term signals that the referent acts in service.

Why then can we not speak of an "ontology of service"? While an awkward phrase and one not used in ordinary conversation or in liturgical parlance, it allows for an understanding of ontology that incorporates function. Such would bespeak what otherwise might be called a "relational ontology." Our essence, is, in part, in our relations. Take a simple example. I am a father of children. Fatherhood describes something essential about who I am. But I am a father only in relation to my children. "Father" is not all that I am. I am also husband, male, human being, neighbor, writer, and yes minister and most centrally, child of God. Still, I am father. Furthermore, I strongly argue that when I became a father, something changed profoundly in my makeup. I can no longer claim that I am not father. Remove fatherhood from me now, and I am no longer I! And it is the web of relations that has made me father.

This, I contend, is a more scriptural understanding of the human creature. God created the human to exist in relation: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27, emphasis added). We live "in Christ," which is to live in a profound relation within God’s trinitarian being.

If this is so, then the offices exist within the context of congregation, within a particular communion, or web of relations. The congregation acknowledges that grace must be mediated within its structured existence. The church cannot, by the very nature of its being, be closed in on itself. It gives "space" or place that recognizes the Spirit’s work from without. Those places are the offices. The communion of saints subsequently acknowledges certain persons as gifted by the Spirit to fill certain functions. The church ordains them, or sets them aside. It also prays that God’s Spirit may endow such persons with the requisite gifts for ministry. In so doing, the congregation recognizes persons who are indeed "different."

This setting aside does, in fact, change the character of the persons ordained, for the web of relations shifts. Elders exist as elders, deacons as deacons, ministers as ministers. In a real sense, they become elder or deacon. Their "status" in the congregation changes. It is a "status of service" instantiating the service of Christ himself. This does not make for a "higher" class of Christians, but it does recognize their difference.

Such a view understands that the Spirit works within an ordinary human institution to shape it into a peculiar sort of community. God uses the ministry of women and men not to form an edifying institution or even a religious society, but what we dare to call the church.
Our reflections on office provide the context for a consideration of the particular office of minister of Word and Sacrament. It is the *particularity* or peculiarity of that office I propose to consider.

It should be no surprise to the reader of this journal that we have been profoundly confused as to the nature of the office. Alisdair MacIntyre, in his influential book, *After Virtue*, describes three "character types" that have acquired legitimacy in contemporary culture: the manager, the therapist, and the virtuoso.¹ When I first read him in the early 1980s, I recognized that I and my fellow ministers were attempting to fit ourselves into one of these types to legitimate our ministries. Some of us gathered around organizational gurus, better to manage the ecclesiastical institution, or to become "change agents" for a just society. Others sharpened their counseling skills to offer pastoral ministry. And still others worked on a sort of performance virtuosity: either to become pulpiteers or liturgical experts. MacIntyre and others have taught us well. Now we work at becoming experts in "spirituality" or "church growth" or even "theologians in residence"! If we have remained "ministers of Word and Sacrament" we have had to massage the term to make it fit a pattern more "relevant" to our culture.

Have we, like Moses, Jeremiah, and Jonah, attempted to escape our call? Have we betrayed a foundational understanding of our particular office? And when the larger church is complicit in the flight, have we, together, tried to slip out from under the very wonder that not only creates the church, but does so to proclaim the gospel to God’s world?

Jesus granted to Peter, the apostle, the "office of the keys" that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). While this might be understood as a fundamental apostolic office (one that the Reformed have traditionally understood to have been restricted to the original apostles), and while it thereby has implications for all the offices, it includes proclamation. When we proclaim, we bind and loose.

Or, to put it in terms of the above discussion of office, the church is called to life by the Word. That is, to use Barth’s familiar division: the Word that is primarily the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word that is proclaimed, and the Word that is written. For it is from the exposition and proclamation of the written Word that the preached Word becomes, through the power and presence of the Spirit, the presence of Christ himself in the midst of the gathered congregation.

That, then, is the primary task of the minister of Word and Sacrament: to proclaim the Word. Lutheran Joseph Sittler put it like this:
The ordained ones are the tellers of that story without which the church was not, is not, and cannot continue. They are those who tell the story of those events, promises, and mighty deeds of God that constitute the church.9

When we put the balance of our time and energy into being better managers, counselors, or ecclesiastical politicians, we not only betray the task for which we were set aside, we rob the church of the very power that makes it the church: the divine address.

It is true that the task of proclamation is itself manifold. We attend to the story when we teach it to young people and to adults. We bring the liberating, challenging, and comforting word in pastoral conversation. We serve the Word in church councils, keeping the story alive even as the consistory debates the color of the new carpet and the synod struggles with funding for mission. The focus on proclamation does not free us from pastoral or administrative responsibility. It simply keeps it in the right balance.

Dare I suspect that we have lost focus because we have lost trust in the power of the Word to call congregations into existence? Have we become so benumbed by numbers that we rely on techniques that will fill our pews? Have we lost trust in the Spirit to call and empower women and men to fulfill the other offices of leadership within the church?

In any case, a recovery of the office will have profound implications for how we practice and educate for ministry. If we see our task as proclamation, it will imply:

1. A deepening familiarity with the story through primary study of Scripture. Of course, that includes a training in the skills and literature of biblical study. One cannot, for example, know the story without knowing the language of the story. We expect nothing less than preachers who know their way around biblical Hebrew and Greek. At the same time, our preachers need to learn skills in reading Scripture critically and openly.

This is more than a matter of seminary education. It needs to happen daily and weekly. Sermon preparation alone will not suffice. Otherwise, the preachers will not learn the full story—the moods and movement within the Psalms, the passion and despair of the prophets, the close and often maddening arguments of the Pauline correspondence. The congregation rightly expects that this person within its midst engages in rigorous reflection on its foundational story. Sittler again:

The principal work of the ordained ministry is reflection: cultivation of one’s penetration into the depth of the Word so that the witness shall be poignant and strong. Clergy have a particular responsibility to the discipline of the reflective life. But they are often negligent in this obligation. It’s a terrible
temptation to have one’s life chopped up by what they tend to call administration, and the temptation must be resisted mightily so as to allow time for the real work of the job.10

2. A familiarity with the context in which the story will be heard. That includes living with the congregation. If the office is shaped by its locus in the communion, by its relationality, then the minister is never a "minister in general." Reformed order recognized this fact when it required that ministers be called to a congregation before they could be ordained. Thus, the preacher lives with open ear and heart to the pains, the joys, the anxieties, the hopes, and the disappointments of the congregation. She is always bringing a Word that becomes the address of the living God to persons in their lives.

Nor does the preacher need to deepen his familiarity with the congregation alone. The congregation lives within a cultural context. Indeed, a Reformed understanding of the church sees its locus in the world. Thus, elders minister to congregants in their daily lives, and deacons minister in works of mercy and justice. Therefore, the minister watches, listens, and reads deeply in cultural, ideological, and intellectual trends.

3. A study of the tradition in which the congregation lives. God’s story is startlingly new; it wakens women and men to new life, new creation. Still, God’s story is fundamentally historical. Israel is not a subject in a work of fiction. Jesus lived a short time in a particular place. God acts in and through history; God accompanies a people through history, being personally and passionately involved in the events not only of our time, but of times that were and that will be. God calls and gathers a church, according to the catechism "out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end." Our proclamation invites women and men into a communion with long and deep antecedents. We sing the songs and pray the prayers of our mothers and fathers, even as we sing new songs and pray new prayers.

That implies familiarity with history, with the history of the congregation, and with the broad context within which it stands. That also includes an understanding of our confessional roots. How did our mothers and fathers read and understand the Word? This is not to attempt to repristinate the past; nor to make a church that delights only antiquarians. It is to learn the wonder of the God who speaks to every time and place. It is to dislodge the congregation from its imprisonment to the contemporary or to shake it from our awful fetish with whatever is new.

I have outlined a "job description" that more than fills the time available for a minister who also needs to tend to her family, to her life in the community, to say nothing of taking the time to delight in her created humanity. To expect and to train ministers to become "professional leaders" of an institution is to detract from the vocation and thus to rob the church of the office itself!
III

My construal of the office of minister of Word and Sacrament places the notion of call in its appropriate context. A person does not venture to choose the office as a "career-option." Each responds to the address, or call, of God. We consider call, then, from within the context of election properly understood.

While a long and honorable strain within Reformed theology reflects on election from the perspective of the eternal destiny of individual believers (and non-believers), a biblical view will begin with Israel, a people elected to further the divine purpose with God's creation. Israel's wrestling with that fact, her resistance, her idolatry, does not negate the priority of the call in the free initiative of God.

The story narrates God's call on individuals from Abraham to Paul, but in every case the call is to serve the people of God. Likewise, God calls the minister and other offices. Thus, the call is in itself God's address to the people, albeit in ways that the community need not be cognizant of.

It is too easy, however, to force the biblical stories of call into an individualized concept of call as though a person receives a private communication to serve God's people. Reformed theology guards against this with a strong notion of how human sin distorts especially those human dispositions we classify as spiritual. Call emerges from the community of faith, from the web of stories, of commitments, of tradition that inform how we understand the various nudges and pulls on the spirit. Nor is it left nebulous. The Liturgy asks of candidates who are about to be ordained: "Do you believe in your heart that you are called by God's Church, and therefore by God himself, to be a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?" The call of God comes through the church.

The call is not a moment, but a process. When a church identifies an individual as possessing gifts for the ministry of proclamation, that is only the beginning. The broader church engages the process in two particular ways within Reformed order. On the one hand the classis engages a candidate over the years in a series of examinations. These are not only formal events, but include conversation about the nature of the call, the candidate's spiritual maturity, and whether the candidate knows and can interpret the story appropriately for a congregation. The classis acts on the call, not primarily for the maintenance of professional standards, but for the sake of the congregation to whom the minister-to-be will dare to proclaim the Word of God.

On the other hand, the church established its professorate, and consequently its seminaries, for the pedagogy of its candidates. The seminary is a laboratory to discover whether the person will be able to learn the story, to obtain the necessary tools to be engaged by the story. The seminaries observe the candidate in situations of ministry. Only then can the church pronounce that the
person is "fit" to stand before a congregation announcing not his or her own theological genius and preference, but the living Word of God.

While the call emerges from within the community as the expression of the Spirit, the call is not circumscribed by the community. The church lives not from itself but from the Word that comes to it from without. In the call, the church opens itself to a Spirit that refuses to conform to the church’s expectations. It is a deadly temptation for the church to call only those who do no more than to confirm the church’s theological preference and to silence the troublemakers of Israel. It is deadly because then the church closes itself to the Word that is its lifeblood.

This is dangerous ground. A supposed call of the Spirit can also tempt the preacher to inflict his exegetical discoveries on a congregation with little attention to the church’s confessional commitments. The history of the church is littered with preachers who have wreaked chaos with their certainty that they have been called to be prophets to an unwelcoming church.

The dangers involved require caution. The minister recognizes that he walks on holy ground; the presence of the holy can kill you. The minister risks idolatry too when he loses track of the nature of grace and presumes that calling and ordination ontologically and automatically make his words God’s Word. But it is also dangerous for the church, for the Spirit of God ranges beyond the community’s control. Moreover, the Spirit cannot be kept within the channels of institutional structure however much the Spirit uses the structure.

It is dangerous; it is adventurous. The Spirit draws not only the church but also the preacher into the future in which God is not tamed, in which the new is delightful, and in which God’s love burns hot even as it comforts. That, finally, may be the problem with including within the definition of ministry the charge "to build up and equip the whole church for its ministry in the world." Not only is that task that of other officers, but it allows ministers to escape into activity so draining they can avoid the powerful, the dangerous, the demanding, but liberating Word that threatens even as it heals. When that happens, the church has cut its life at the nerve.

ENDNOTES

1. While "ministry" is a general term, I shall use "minister" throughout this article as shorthand for "minister of Word and Sacrament."


3. The last named office is placed in parentheses because the Reformed Church in America is the only Reformed body that retains the "fourth office."


11. *Worship the Lord*, 52, emphasis added.