

“The Supreme Ministry”
Colossians 1:24-29 (NRSV)

In his First Letter to the Corinthian church, the apostle Paul clearly stated:

... **there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit**; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each [one] is given [some] manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (1 Cor. 12:4-7).

Certainly, Paul knew that **no ministry ought to be valued over another**. Nevertheless, he went on to tell the Corinthians that he especially considered **the ministry of “those who prophesy” to possess a “greater” gift** because he felt that “they speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (1 Cor. 14:1-5), as well as instruction (1 Cor. 14:18-19), whereas gifts like “speaking in tongues” were more for personal edification. Prophecy was a gift given for others.

Now this ministry of **“prophesying”** is commonly understood by Reformed and Presbyterian people to be **preaching**, or speaking forth the Word of God, interpreting and applying the Scriptures to everyday life.

R. C. Sproul, the president of the Ligonier Valley Study Centre in western Pennsylvania, and a popular Reformed and Presbyterian theologian in his own right, tells of having the following exchange with one of his students:

I remember a starry-eyed student who looked at me in wonderment, “What was it like for you when you were just a minister?” I lost it. I exploded in a paroxysm of indignation. “What do you mean ‘just’ a minister? Don’t you realize that the parish ministry is the highest calling on earth? God had only one Son and he made him a preacher!” (*Tabletalk*, 1985, Vol. 2, No. 12, p. 2)

In my mind’s eye, I see Dr. Sproul at his theatrical best, standing over his student like a latter-day Luther, while the student is trying to find somewhere to hide. Perhaps Sproul was just having some fun, but he was serious about his point, which is that the Christian ministry is the highest calling. Even politicians like **John Turner** would agree that it should be ranked along with other forms of high public service.

Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that we are called to **many different occupations** – and all of them holy and blessed by God, if they are within God’s will – **the gospel ministry** in its various forms **is the highest possible calling**. I realize that’s not the way most of the world sees it today. Being a preacher-pastor doesn’t often even appear, let alone figure very highly, in the lists of occupations high school, college and university students might be given to consider, but it is, nevertheless, the greatest calling on earth.

Having introduced us to the supremacy of Christ in creation (1:15-17), in the church (1:18), and in reconciliation (1:19-23), Paul now gives us **a supremely magnificent perspective on his own ministry**, which is **to share the gospel with others**. He offers a remarkably balanced view, delineating four aspects of his ministry: his ministerial **attitude** (1:24), his ministerial **charge** (1:25-27), his ministerial **purpose** (1:28), and his ministerial **passion** (1:29). Although this is especially profitable for those of us who are in **the “professional ministry,”** it ought to prove equally helpful to every believer because **we are all called to “ministry”** whatever our stated vocation may be.

1. **Paul’s ministerial attitude** (1:24).

I know there are some ministers out there who adopt **a special ministerial tone or style** – but it is not an attitude I particularly favour. Some of these ministers seem to feel they need to adopt a certain voice in the pulpit; they often sound rather unctuous or holier-than-thou. Some may also like to dress differently than everyone else; they will always wear a “collar.” That is not the attitude of which Paul speaks.

Instead, **Paul sounds rather down-to-earth**. He says he is aware that gospel ministry involves suffering. **The preacher is among his flock not so much as to “lay it on” as to live it out**. “I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake,” he writes, “and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church” (1:24). I suspect Paul means this: **if you don’t in some way identify with the suffering all around you, you will not make a very good minister**. I must admit there are many times when I come away from a hospital bed, I feel the pain and suffering of the patient I have just visited. I figure that that just confirms me in my calling to ministry. I am well aware that there are others who find it difficult to do this kind of thing.

Paul says he rejoices in his sufferings (1:24a). “Oh, yeah,” says the secularist. “That’s just baptized masochism!” Yet this is **not just one experience** Paul mentions of “rejoicing in suffering.” On several other occasions he speaks of actually “**boasting**” **in his sufferings** because he has discovered that in his suffering and weakness, God has given him strength (Rom. 5:3; 2 Cor. 11:30; 12:5, 9-10). And interestingly enough, **Peter** also speaks of suffering and rejoicing in the same breath (1 Pe. 4:13). And it is said that **all the apostles** rejoiced that they were counted “worthy to suffer” (Acts 5:41). **Why then is suffering welcome in ministry?**

Because **it keeps us real**. Because **it reminds us that we are human beings** like everyone else. Because **it brings good to the church**. Paul also says he has this attitude about suffering because **it lets him share a little bit in Christ’s sufferings**, and **because**, when its all said and done, **it’s done for the sake of [Christ’s] body, that is the church**.

There wouldn’t be any advance in the kingdom if God’s servants were not willing to suffer a little for him. **The gospel has always spread through missionary hardship**. I think only of **Father Damien**, a Belgian missionary who, exactly 100 years ago, when faced with a public health crisis on the island of Hawaii where he first began to work, went freely to live and die with those who suffered from the dreaded disease of leprosy (now called Hansen’s disease), and who were quarantined on a peninsula of the island of Molokai. His story is not forgotten. His statue is found in the entrance of the Hawaiian Capitol with these words on the base: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn. 15:13).

Yet there is something more at work here, and it is far more subtle. **Believers grow through their suffering**, and the **good they receive flows to others – thus edifying the church**. **John Newton**, the old sea dog and slaver, turned preacher-pastor and hymn writer, said,

God appoints his ministers to be sorely exercised, both from without and within; that they may sympathize with their flock, and know in their own hearts the deceitfulness of sin, the infirmities of the flesh, and the way in which the Lord supports and bears all those who trust in him.

God’s servants benefit as they suffer, and everyone benefits.

Paul went on to describe his suffering as somehow “completing what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions ...” (1:24b). This is one of the most debated verses in all Scripture! Whole books have been written on its interpretation. We know **it does not mean** that Paul made up what was lacking in the atoning sufferings of Christ, for the whole of Colossians, as well as the rest of the New Testament teaches the sufficiency of Christ’s Atonement (see for e.g., 1:12-14, 19-22; 2:13-14). Paul couldn’t help with the Atonement; that was Christ’s work. **But the phrase does teach** for sure that a close identification develops between Christ and the Church through suffering.

This is exactly what **Pope John Paul II** felt in his final suffering days. Suffering from Parkinson’s disease as he did, along with various other ailments, including having been shot years earlier, put him on the same road as Christ on his way to Calvary. This is also what **John and Eloise Bergen**, a retired Canadian missionary couple from Calgary Alberta, who served in Kenya with the Kelowna-based Hope for the Nations mission organization, must have felt after they were brutalized by some of the very people who were hired to protect them. Yet, like Christ, they forgave them and planned to return to Africa somewhere else to continue their work. “I’m not alive to stay at home and fossilize. I have to go back and finish the job,” John is reported to have declared (Christian Week, Vol. 22, No. 12, Sept. 1, 2008).

How then did Paul “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”? Maybe, like all those who follow in the path of our Lord, he was “rejoicing” because his “sufferings” (which are Christ’s sufferings) were bringing the total nearer and nearer to the ultimate goal and hastening the final Day of the coming of the kingdom. However that may be, **one thing is clear: Paul knew his sufferings were good for the Church.** They brought him into a special closeness with Christ. Every blow that fell upon him fell on his Master, and thus bound them even closer together in mutual suffering. Paul knew that suffering was miserable, but the resulting sense of union with Christ is wonderful.

2. **Paul’s ministerial charge** (Col. 1:25-27).

What is another reason he was willing to suffer? So he could get the message of God’s love across. Paul writes, “I became its [i.e., the Church’s] servant according to God’s commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known ... (1:25). He’d do whatever it took, as long as the Word was preached and applied, understood and received.

That's what all preacher-pastors try to do. **Get the Word of Life across. Sure, it's "a mystery that has been hidden** through the ages and generations" (1:26a). It's still a mystery for many people today. One can't just read about God's love off the surface of the pages of the Holy Bible. It's a message that needs to be interpreted and applied. But, the truth is also this, this message "has now [at least since the time of the apostles] been revealed to [God's] saints" (1:26b). And the biggest news of all is that this gospel, this good news about God's love and life, finally and fully revealed in the suffering, dying and risen Lord, Jesus Christ, is to be made available to all God's people.

This was and is **a message not just for Jews but also for Gentiles** (1:27a).

Bishop John Green of Sydney, Australia, tells about working with a group of boys, some of aboriginal blood and some of English descent, and how **the racial tensions** were so bad they wouldn't sit with each other on the bus. One day, when things were all out of hand, he stopped the bus, ordered them all out, and told them they were no longer brown and white, but green. He lined them up in alternate order and made each one say, "I'm green," as he got back on the bus. They drove along quietly integrated," until he heard a voice from the back of the bus say, "Okay, light green on one side and dark green on the other!"

The **ancient Jews and Gentiles** were like that, but with distinctly less humour, and their animosities went beyond the colour of their skin. The long-prophesied reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles was truly a "mystery." Then Christ came, and "the dividing wall, that is, the hostility" was "broken down" between them, and Jews and Gentiles became a new humanity, a new body, establishing peace (or shalom) among each other. They found that they were all "citizens with the saints, and also members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:13-18). They were all able to sit down together at one table.

This had come about **because of "Christ in you, the hope of glory"** (1:27b). The indwelling of the Lord Jesus Christ is what made it possible. It happened in Ephesus, and it also happened in Colossae, and many other places. And it can happen today. One of the greatest glories of the gospel is that it always brings people who are different from each other together.

3. Paul's ministerial purpose (Col. 1:28).

Paul's goal is nothing short of proclaiming Christ, explaining who Christ is, drawing people to Christ, helping them to understand Christ and what he has done, so that he may also present to Christ all kinds of mature and fully-grown Christians. "It is he who we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ" (1:28).

Paul's means of bringing believers to maturity, according to verse 28, was to proclaim, admonish and teach. **He proclaimed Christ.** Christ was the beginning and the end of his message. As the eighteenth-century Calvinist preacher, **George Whitefield** said, "Others may preach the gospel better than I, but no one can preach a better gospel." After people responded to his message, **he warned everyone.** I guess that sounds rather harsh in this rather gentle and tolerant age, but I also know there is an appropriate time to correct and to warn people. It's what we do with our children and grandchildren if we want to guide their way safely through the dangers of this world. **He also spent time teaching everyone.** Truth has to be rehearsed and repeated, as it is learned. This was the methodical way in which he sought to "present **everyone** mature in Christ."

4. Paul's ministerial passion (Col. 1:29).

Finally, **this wasn't just a job for Paul; it was his passion.** "For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that [Christ] powerfully inspires within me" (1:29). No one can hope to have a biblically authentic ministry without hard work. The verbs he uses in this sentence to describe his work speak of exhaustive, hard labour and an agonizing output of energy. Paul strained every physical and moral sinew to present people mature in Christ. There was hardly a time when he didn't think of and work with those for whom he was called and engaged in the gospel ministry.

It is sometimes said, "When all is said and done, there is more said than done." It ought not to be that way! **Martin Luther** worked so hard that many days, according to his biographers, he fell into bed. **John Wesley** rode 60 to 70 miles many days of his life and preached an average of three sermons a day. **Dwight L. Moody's** bedtime prayer on one occasion as he rolled his bulk into bed, was, "Lord, I'm tired! Amen."

G. Campbell Morgan, a gifted preacher-pastor of an earlier age, kept a newspaper clipping entitled, “Sheer Hard Work” for twenty years that said,

What is true of the minister is true of every [one] who bears the name of Christ. We have not begun to touch the great business of salvation when we have sung, “Rescue the perishing; care for the dying.” We have not entered into the business of evangelizing the city or the world until we have put our own lives into the business, our own immediate physical endeavour, inspired by spiritual devotion.

(The Westminster Pulpit, Vol 3&4, p. 160)

Paul’s ministerial drive is a model for us all.

R. C. Sproul is right: **the ministry of the gospel is a glorious thing**. But we do not have to be an apostle or a reformer or even a preacher-pastor to do it.

Some years ago **a woman in Africa became a Christian**. Being filled with gratitude she decided to do something for Christ. She was blind, uneducated, and seventy years of age. She came to her missionary with her French Bible and asked her to underline John 3:16 in red ink. Mystified, the missionary watched her as she took her Bible and sat in front of the boys’ school in the afternoon. When school dismissed, she would call a boy or two and ask if they knew French. When they proudly responded they did, she’d say, “Please read the passage underlined in red.” When they did, she would ask, “Do you know what this means?” And she would tell them about Jesus Christ. The missionary says that over the years, 24 young men became pastors due to her work (Maxie Dunnam, Communicator’s Commentary, 1982, p. 363-364).

She had it all: a ministerial attitude, a ministerial charge, a ministerial purpose and a ministerial passion. **What about you?**

Amen

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