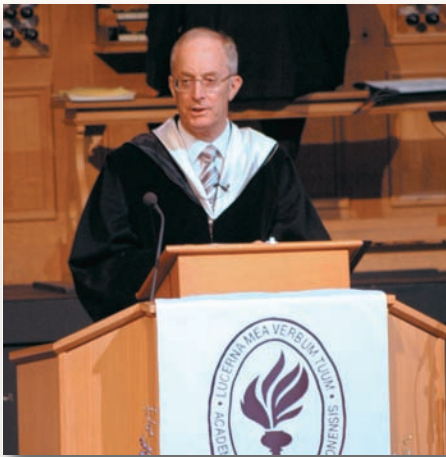


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The Preacher as Priest



Speech held at the Thirty-ninth Anniversary Meeting and the Thirty-fourth convocation of the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches on September 5, 2008. More detail on this topic can be found in my forthcoming Rediscovering the Elder: An Ancient Office for Today's Church.

One of the major differences between Rome and the Reformed churches is that Rome has priests and the Reformed churches have ministers of the Word. So, why should we now speak about the preacher as priest? Are we not going down the wrong track when we do that? We have ministers, not priests! Yet, if we are to do justice to Scripture, we need to recognize that the office of preacher does indeed include a very important priestly element so that in a restricted biblical sense we can indeed speak of the preacher as a priest.

In order to see why this is so, we will need to see something of the background of the office of minister as we find it in the Old Testament. One part of that background is the office of elder. The ministerial office is an elder office. Another part of the background is the office of priest. As we shall see, an important aspect of the priestly office is continued in the office of the minister of the Word. So let us begin by briefly considering the elder part of the background of the office of minister as it appeared in the church after Pentecost.

The minister as elder

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, elders were soon found in every church. That was to be expected. After all, the first Christians were Jews and their synagogues had always included elders. That was part of their ecclesiastical heritage. Why should they not have elders now that the Messiah had come? Indeed, the first Christian congregation at Jerusalem was called a synagogue (James 2:2) and the apostles saw to it that every church had elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

Now it is important to realize that the term elder could also be used of other offices. That was already the case before Christ's coming. For example, although the Jewish Sanhedrin included both

the chief priests and teachers of the law (Luke 22:66; cf. Acts 5:21), yet the Sanhedrin was known as the Council of the Elders. The office of elder was therefore considered to encompass the chief priests and teachers of the law, although these offices remained distinct from the eldership. Another example of this sort of thing is the Apostle Peter identifying himself as a fellow-elder when addressing the elders in the congregations to whom he is writing (1 Pet 5:1). The Apostle was also an elder but there remained a clear distinction between the two offices.

That the term elder could encompass more than one office in the church is also clear from the fact that the eldership can refer to both the teaching and ruling elders. We read in 1 Timothy 5:17, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." This passage has been correctly interpreted as indicating that there are two elder offices: the ruling elder and the teaching elder, or, as we usually identify them, the elder and the minister. There is an underlying unity between these two offices. They are bound together in the eldership. Yet, there is also the distinction. It is a distinction that goes back to Old Testament times, namely the

distinction between the tasks of ruling and teaching.

Ruling was done in the Old Testament by the elders; teaching was primarily done by the priests (Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; Mal 2:4-9), although the elders also had teaching responsibilities (Deut 31:9-12; 32:7). But it was up to the priests and the tribe of Levi in the first place to expound the gospel and to proclaim it (Deut 33:10; cf. 18:1-8). It was not for nothing that the Levitical cities were spread over the entire country (Num 35:1-8; Josh 21:1-42). There had to be preachers of the gospel for the people. And so, although elders also had teaching responsibilities, it was in the first place the task of the priests. As the prophet Malachi put it, the priest "is the messenger of the Lord Almighty" (Mal 2:7).

Now if the Old Testament had a ruling office in the elder and a teaching office in the priest, then one would expect that in the new Israel of God, the church (Gal 6:16), there would also be two distinct offices with similar responsibilities. Indeed, in the light of the Old Testament, we can better understand that when the Apostle wrote to Timothy he distinguished between "the elders who direct the affairs of the church well" and the elders "whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17). The New Testament indicates that those whose work is preaching and teaching have inherited that task from the priests. There is a direct continuity between the teaching task of the priest and the office of the minister of the Word.

Let us now turn to the New Testament to see this continuity.

The minister as priest

There are especially two passages that we will consider. First there is Romans 15:16 and then 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. After looking at these passages, we will also consider some implications.

Romans 15:16

In Romans 15 the Apostle Paul describes himself as "a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles." He continues by saying that this identity means that he has "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:16). Notice that the preaching of the gospel is here understood as a priestly task. One can also translate the phrase "the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel" by "ministering as a priest the gospel of God" (NASB). It is in preaching the gospel that Paul and any subsequent preacher acts as a priest. Given the Old Testament background, such a description of the office of minister is not unexpected. The preaching task of the Levitical priests has been taken over by the New Testament office of the proclamation of the gospel. Now the purpose of his preaching is that "the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God sanctified by the Spirit" (cf. Isa 66:18-19). In an analogous way,

There is a direct continuity between the teaching task of the priest and the office of the minister of the Word

the modern preacher as Christ's servant proclaims the gospel in the expectation that God may receive the Spirit-sanctified offering of a congregation eager and willing to serve Him, as is their spiritual service (Rom 12:1-2; 1 Pet 2:5). All of this is a far cry from the Roman Catholic position that the priest offers up Christ again and again in the mass. No, when a minister of

the Word acts as a priest he is preaching the gospel so that people – old and young – may be an offering acceptable to God because they have been brought to the obedience of the gospel. The purpose in view for a preacher is, to use Calvin's expression, "the offering to God of souls purified by faith."

When speaking of the present day minister taking over the proclamation task of the priest, we should also take note of a prophecy in the Old Testament. When Isaiah predicted the inclusion of the Gentiles into the church, he included the promise that the Lord would select some of them to be priests and Levites (Isa 66:21). Since the Old Testament worship has been abrogated, these priests and Levites can only mean the ministers of the gospel. They are the priests and Levites of today.

We now turn to a second passage, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

2 Corinthians 5:18-20

The preaching of the gospel as a priestly task can also be seen in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. In Old Testament times, a priest administered the reconciliation between God and his people. He did this by way of offering sacrifices, teaching the law, and giving the priestly blessing. It was this ministry of reconciliation which God gave to his apostles and their co-workers. The Apostle Paul writes:

(God) gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5: 18-20).

Within our present context, three inferences can be drawn from this passage. First, as in the Old Testament, there is also in the New Testament church a special service or ministry (*diakonia*) – “the ministry of reconciliation.” This ministry is the ministry of restoring peace between God and human beings, a peace that had been lost because of sin (cf. Rom 5:1, 10; 16:20; Col 1:19-20). Second, this ministry of reconciliation, which had been entrusted to the priests in the Old Testament, has been committed in the New Testament church to Christ’s ambassadors, such as Paul and his co-workers. Third, as the priests in ancient Israel not only acted, but also spoke for God when teaching and explaining his Word to the people, so the ambassadors in the New Testament church speak for God with the authority given by Christ. Such ambassadors speak not only on behalf of God, but also in his place (“as though God were making his appeal through us”). The enduring ambassadorial office in the church is that of minister or teaching elder. Those holding this office are charged to proclaim the Word of God, as a herald (Rom 10:14-15; 2 Tim 4:2; cf. 1 Tim 4:13-14). This proclamation is central for the ministry of reconciliation. The message is: “We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

And so the office of preaching and teaching the gospel essentially replaces the Old Testament priest in the official ministry of reconciliation and it is little wonder that the preaching and teaching task is mentioned as a separate office. We see this, for example, in Ephesians 4:11 where besides apostles, prophets, and evangelists, also “pastors and teachers” are mentioned as Christ’s gift to his church. It has traditionally been understood that the reference to “pastors and

teachers” refers to the same office, namely that of the teaching elder. The ruling elder is not mentioned. Teachers are also mentioned as being present, along with prophets, in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1). Furthermore, the Apostle Paul mentions the office of teacher after apostles and prophets in 1 Corinthians 12:28. This clear differentiation of the teaching office, with its own special responsibilities and accountability, sets it apart from the ruling elder.

Now the qualifications for the elder or overseer are listed in well-known places such as 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These qualifications count for both the teaching and the ruling elder. No distinction is made in these passages. This seems to imply that beyond these basic qualifications,

Only the best preparation possible is sufficient to honour the responsibilities that the risen Christ gives to his ambassadors and messengers

the teaching elder must have a special gift for teaching and exhortation. That seems to be the point of the Apostle Paul when he combines different gifts with different people in Romans 12 where he writes: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is exhorting, let him exhort (Rom 12:6-8).

The one with the gift of teaching should use it as a teacher and the

one with a gift of exhortation, as an exhorter. These last two gifts are vital for the office of teaching elder or pastor. It stands to reason that as a priest in ancient Israel would have been specially trained for his task in the ministry of reconciliation, also in the New Testament church only the best preparation possible is sufficient to honour the responsibilities that the risen Christ gives to his ambassadors and messengers. In light of the special demands and expectations for the teaching elder, beyond that of a ruling elder, it is understandable that a distinction was made between the teaching and ruling elder as two separate offices. It is in this light that we must read 1 Timothy 5:17, which speaks of the elders who direct the affairs of the church, or rule, and the elders who preach and teach.

Some consequences of the distinctions

The whole issue of distinguishing between the office of ruling and teaching elder, or minister, is not just an academic exercise. It has some very real ramifications. I would like to mention three implications, first, for their specific tasks; second for their support, and finally the matter of equality.

First, with respect to their task, in Old Testament times, only the priests were ordained and designated by the Lord to function in the official service of reconciliation, be it by sacrificing, teaching, and blessing the people. Anyone else who attempted to do their specific task had to be put to death (e.g., Num 3:5-10, 38; 16:40).

Ministers of the gospel, the teaching elders, may function in the *fulfilled* ministry of reconciliation as spokesmen for God (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-20). In this sense they are heirs of the Old Testament office of priest. As the priests of old,

they may teach, exhort, and bless the congregation before God. The force of the analogy would seem to indicate that normally only the teaching elders may administer the Word officially as spokesman for God in the public worship services. We therefore have the practice that when no ordained minister is present, the officiating elder reads a sermon prepared by a minister. Also, in giving the blessing, an officiating elder simply reads the words of Scripture (e.g. Num 6:24-26; 2 Cor 13:14), but he does not raise his hands in blessing. That has always been the prerogative of the priest (Deut 21:5; Num 6:22-27; cf. Lev 9:22) and thus today is the sole privilege of an ordained minister. It is of interest to note that synagogue services normally ended with the priestly blessing given by a priest with uplifted hands (Num 6:22-27). If there was no priest, no blessing with upraised hands was given; instead, the words of benediction were simply recited.

A second implication of the distinction between the ruling and teaching elder (or minister) relates to their support. Because the priests and Levites were employed full time in the ministry of reconciliation, the Lord guaranteed the livelihood of the tribe of Levi by granting them the tithes as their inheritance (Num 18:21-24). Ministers of the gospel are likewise to receive their livelihood from the gospel (1 Cor 9:9-14). As in Old Testament times, there is no general mandate for God's people to support the ruling elder. We do read in 1 Timothy 5 that "the elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour,

especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages'" (1 Tim 5:17-18).

This would seem to indicate that those labouring in preaching and teaching, namely the minister of the Word, should especially be honoured and such honour should include wages. The ruling elder should also be honoured and financial support is not necessarily excluded in showing that honour.

The relationship of both elder offices to each other as well as towards the congregation is one of serving

A third implication relates to the equality of the elder offices. Although the teaching and ruling elders are distinct offices, they share the fact that they are both known as elders and they are both called to serve the church (cf. Matt 23:8). One could say that the minister of the Word is in essence a specialized elder. Recognizing the common element underlying both offices undercuts any idea of clericalism or ecclesiastical hierarchy in the church. Also, the ruling elder is a shepherd of the flock with all that this entails. There is to be no domineering of the one elder office over the other. The only "boss" in the church is the Lord Jesus Christ who rules the church as the head the body (Eph

1:20-22). The relationship of both elder offices to each other as well as towards the congregation is one of serving (cf. 1 Pet 5:3, 5).

In conclusion

The minister is a teaching elder, an office distinct from the ruling elder. In order to fully appreciate the office of a minister of the Word we need to realize that this office continues a vital task which the Old Testament priests had. That task is the administration of reconciliation by way of teaching and preaching.

It is a great tragedy in the history of the church that elders came to be called priests in part because of the erroneous belief that the Lord's Supper was to be regarded as a sacrificial meal where Christ had to be sacrificed over and over again. By God's grace the Reformation of the sixteenth century set us free from that heresy. We may know that the office of priest in administering reconciliation has been taken over by the herald of the glad tidings of the fulfilled sacrifice of Jesus Christ who was raised for our justification and ascended into glory (Rom 4:25; Heb 10:11-14). We have no need for Old Testament priests, such as Rome has. But we do have need of priestly preachers who administer the redemption in Christ through the proclamation of the gospel and so are instruments to prepare a people as an offering of praise to God.

May the Lord our God bless the ministers in their labours and bless the College in continuing to train new ones.

