

THE FOUNDATION

101

A Theology of Ministry Or What We Believe About What We Do

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IF YOU ARE READING THIS, you are most likely involved in some sort of ministry to women. You may be just starting off or someone who has been involved for years. You may be starting a new ministry, running an established ministry, or participating in some other ministry in a small or large way.

Ministry can be a bit like a roller coaster ride. It can bring moments of great joy and satisfaction, as when a program was successful or when we see someone grow in her faith in the triune God. There can be great fellowship with the others that we work with or with those we serve.

It can, however, have its lows as well. We can find ourselves struggling with conflict, fatigue, discouragement and self-doubt. Over the years, I have met women involved in various ministries in the church who are struggling. They may have started off excited and hopeful, but are now stressed, burdened, and feel inadequate to the task.

There may be various immediate reasons for these difficulties. Min-

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istry, after all, has many built-in challenges. Discouragement may seem to stem from lack of help in the way of people or resources, lack of appreciation or support from leadership in the church, stress and/or conflict either within the ministry or in other situations in one's life.

While all these factors may contribute to discouragement and burnout, inevitably I find that the deepest reason is not something about the ministry itself, but has roots in the theology, the understanding of God, that these women are, for the most part unconsciously, working from.

To understand this better, I want you to take a moment to think about the kinds of questions that we ask or are asked about our ministries:

- What are the goals of this ministry?
- How do we measure whether we have accomplished them?
- How should we structure this ministry?
- How will we run our programs?
- How do we find women to help with the ministry?
- How do we get women to come to our program?
- What “helps” can I find to assist us in doing our ministry more efficiently and/or effectively?
- Are we producing enough results?
- How do I know that I am doing what I should be doing and that I am doing a good enough job?

Notice that most of the questions begin with “how” or “what”. And if you peruse many of the books or helps out there available to you, you may find that many of them also begin with these phrases:

- how to run a successful ministry
- what is effective prayer
- how to know what your gifts are

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Now these are all good questions and can be very helpful. But they are not the first question, and they all need to be asked as secondary questions, not primary ones. **The first question we need to ask, and the question we need to come back to again and again is: Who is God and who are we in relation to God?**

A professor I had in seminary once told us that burnout in ministry and the Christian life is a theological problem. In the years since then, I have seen the truth of that statement over and over again. When we get wrapped up in the what and how of ministry, we often begin to think of

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God as a taskmaster, as one who is mostly concerned with our performance and our output for His kingdom, leading us to serve out of duty, or fear and anxiety.

In this paper, I want to look at the good and wonderful character and purposes of our triune God, and how who He is informs and enables our involvement in ministry. My hope is that, in gaining a clearer understanding of our theology of ministry, that you will be released to be joyful and encouraged in your work.

We will develop a working theology of ministry by focusing on two questions: Whose ministry is it? and What does God expect of us?

Whose ministry is it?

This may seem like a strange question to begin with. What difference, you may be tempted to ask, does it make how I answer this question? Well, as it turns out, it makes a huge difference.

I think we usually think of what we are involved in as our ministry - this is what I am doing for God. This is how I serve the church, use my gifts, do my part. This ministry is what God has entrusted me with or called me to. Of course, this way of thinking about it can tempt us to attach our identities to our ministries. How the ministry goes reflects something about us. We can also be tempted to feel that the success of the ministry is our responsibility, that God is counting on us to “do our part.”

Is this true? Does God give out tasks to His people to do for Him? Is it up to us? Whose ministry is it anyway?

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We don't have our own ministries. **Our entire ministry is nothing more and nothing less than participation in Christ's own continuing ministry.**

The triune God has a ministry one that started with His creation. It has been fulfilled in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the

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Incarnate Son, and continues from the Father, through Jesus and in the Holy Spirit. To more fully understand the significance of the fact that all of our ministry is participation in Christ's, we need to take some time to reflect on the nature of Christ's ministry.

What is the goal of Christ's ministry?

It is in Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God that God fulfills His good purposes for us. Jesus is, so to speak, the one true minister of God.

What is God's purpose for us? Why did He create and redeem us?

What we learn in Scripture is that the triune **God has created human creatures for the express purpose of *transforming them into His beloved children, able to share (or participate) fully in the love, joy and peace of the triune life.*** This has always been God's intention from the foundations of the world.

Take a moment to look at passages that speak of God's purposes for us:

Consider for a moment what it means that we are created to be God's children . . .

John 1: 9-13 (note vv. 12-13)

Ephesians 1: 3-6

I John 3:1

Consider for a moment what it means that we are created to be God's children, "born of God," as it says in the Gospel of John. This is

truly amazing! God does not create us to be good workers or servants for Him. God does not create us merely to become good, moral beings on earth, but far more and far deeper than that. The difference is greater than the difference between a servant in a household as compared to a child.

The word Scripture uses to talk about the relationship that God intends to establish with us is a filial word taken from the world of family, not an economic or merely legal term taken from law courts. We are to become His very children, to know Him as our true Father and ourselves as His beloved, precious children. God intends to share His very self with us, to enable us to enjoy an intimate relationship with Him, the very creator of the universe. This is what He always purposed for us, this is why He created us in the first place.

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This is the wonderful purpose of God for us. The New Testament writers strained the very bounds of language to attempt to tell us this good news. How can it be that God desires to share His very (zoe) or God-life, His eternal life with us? Peter states in his second letter that:

*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence, by which He has granted to us His precious and very great promises, that you may become partakers of the divine nature 2
Peter 1:4*

We are to be God's own children, able to partake of and to be in true fellowship with God to the point of having a share in His very nature. We are to belong to our Creator and Redeemer in such a way that His very life and character flow through us by the power of His indwelling Spirit, the spirit of sonship as Paul tells us in Romans 8. God's purpose for humanity is essentially relational. He is healing and transforming us so that we can be with Him and enjoy a relationship of love with Him forever.

Therefore, **the tasks of ministry, whatever they may be, need to serve or feed this purpose of growing us up into this relationship with God that HE graciously gives us in Christ.** We are not primarily out to entertain or to create good servants, or to establish an expanding program, but to serve others in such a way that invites them in and enables them to live more and more fully in a dynamic, trusting relationship, with our

God through Jesus Christ.

How does Jesus fulfill this wonderful purpose of God?

The Two Movements of Christ's Ministry

Jesus is the One in whom and through whom God accomplishes this amazing purpose for us. He is the One in whom God and humanity meet. In Jesus, we meet and know the Creator of the Universe.

Jesus is God's self-revelation, where God shows up "in person."

All revelation that had preceded Jesus was revelation about God. Now God reveals Himself to us. Jesus is God's self-revelation, where God shows up "in person." In Jesus, we come face to face with God Himself. In the last statement of the prologue, John says "No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God, who lives in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known" (John 1:18).

Jesus brings God to us. But that is not all. In grabbing a hold of **our** fallen flesh, uniting Himself with us, He is also the One who brings us to God. In John's prologue to His gospel, in the verse that immediately follows the section we've already looked at, he tells us how Jesus fulfills God's good purposes for us:

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us" John 1:14

The early church fathers spoke of Jesus' ministry as actually two movements. He is our Mediator, and His ministry is a ministry of media-

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tion. In and through this mediation, Jesus gives us the power to become children of God (John 1:12). It is in and through Him that we are both created and redeemed, and made able to become "partakers of the divine nature."

So **the first movement of Christ's ministry is to bring God to humanity, to clearly shine forth His glory, His great love and grace to-**

wards us, to show us His Father and the relationship that He has with the Father that He has come to give us a share in. We know that in Jesus, we see the fullness of God Himself, we see His very heart (see Col. 1:19; Heb. 1:3, along with John 1:18)

The second movement of Christ's ministry, the Word made flesh, is to unite Himself to fallen humanity in such a way as to redeem us and make us children that He can take with Him back to the Father. Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, tells us that for our sake God made Jesus "to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus doesn't just come to bring us pills like a doctor, to offer us healing outside of Himself. No, as Athanasius, an early church father says, Jesus becomes one with the patient to heal her from the inside out! Athanasius and others from those first centuries after Christ, spoke of Christ's ministry as a wonderful exchange: Jesus, who is Son of God by nature, became Son of Man by grace, so that we, who are sons and daughters of man by nature can become sons and daughters of God by grace.

Jesus came to take from us all that hurts, twists and destroys us and give us all that is His, including His very Spirit and a share in His relationship with His Heavenly, Father.

Christ's mediation leads us from death to life. He says "Amen" to the just judgment of God on sin, destroying it and separating us from it. He heals us, straightens out all the twistedness of our fallen lives, and transforms us so that we can have a share in His love, peace, joy, and life He gives us Himself.

In John's gospel we learn that the Father shares all things with the Son, and the Son, in His double-movement ministry, transforms us to share in His very sonship so that we rightly, truly and actually can regard ourselves as children of God because He has made it so. How truly wonderful to contemplate both what God is saving us from and even more, what God is saving us for - why He redeems us - to belong to Him as His beloved children!

We get a good look at what Christ's sharing with us really means in Jesus' prayer to His Father, recorded in the 17th chapter of the Gospel of John.

Jesus doesn't just come to bring us pills like a doctor, to offer us healing outside of Himself.

Read the entire chapter of John 17.

I want you to make two lists. First, what do the Father and the Son share with each other? Second, what does the Son share with us? In comparing the two lists, what do you notice?

Everything the Father shares with the Son, the Son shares with us—His joy, His word, His glory, His love. Let's just sit in that truth for a moment! Again, Jesus primary ministry is to fulfill God's filial purposes

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for us. His ministry certainly includes saving us from our sins, but this is in order to make us His brothers and sisters, able to share in His relationship with His Father, having His very life in us.

The Completed Ministry of Christ

Jesus' ministry does not create a potential, but puts in place a living reality.

This purpose of God's has been accomplished in Christ. The author of Hebrews emphasizes the completed work of Jesus in his opening verses, "When He had made purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:4). His sitting at God's right hand means that He has finished the work of purification for sins, He has done it.

Read Ephesians 1:3-10, 2:4-6 and Colossians 2:9-15

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lationship that we
are to receive.*

Make a list of all that Paul tells his readers that God has done for them in Christ. Notice the verb tenses Paul uses.

Jesus doesn't just create a potential that we make real, Jesus creates a new reality of a right relationship that we are to receive. In Jesus we are justified, forgiven, cleansed, sanctified, and glorified. Often we think only of Jesus justifying us. But, if we leave it at that, then we'll approach sancti-

fication as if it is a work left mostly up to us (with God's help).

But the New Testament is clear that our sanctification, our perfection, is also ours in Christ. We are not saved by grace and then sanctified by works. Since Christ is both our justification and sanctification, then to have Christ and His Spirit in communion with His Father is to have both. This is why John Calvin (and Luther too) insisted that Scripture taught that our whole salvation is complete in Christ.

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Consider these verses:

I Corinthians 6:11: *But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

I Corinthians 1:30: *He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption..."*

Hebrews 10:10: *And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

Hebrews 10:14: *For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.*

Hebrews 13:12: *So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood.*

Notice again the verb tenses here. Jesus has accomplished our whole salvation for us. We receive from Him our whole lives, our complete identities, and our growing maturity, day by day, in Christ through the Spirit.

The Already and the Not Yet

Even though this is a reality that Jesus gives us, so that it is true that we are now His beloved children, we are also on the way to being 'holy and blameless' in Him, and it is not always obvious that this is now the case. John, in his first letter, affirms that "it does not yet appear what we shall

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be” even though we are truly the children of God (I John 3:1.2). Paul tells the Colossians that their lives are “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). So there is a revealed mystery here in seeing the truth of our lives in Christ.

We live in the times between the ‘already’ in Christ and the ‘not yet’ to come. We are waiting to have the full truth of who we are now in Christ to be made manifest. But the hiddenness of this work does not therefore make it less real or solid.

Often, somewhere in our journey with Christ, we lose sight of this truth that Jesus accomplishes our whole salvation for us, and where we find ourselves living as if what Jesus did only provides us a potential that we have to make real. The Holy Spirit helps us, but really, we need to bridge the gap between God’s intentions for us, and where we find ourselves today.

In this situation, we feel thrown back on ourselves, struggling to be more righteous, more giving, more Christ-like by sheer willpower. We live, consciously or unconsciously, as if we are trying to close the giant credibility gap between where we are and where we should be. The Christian life then becomes a burden, and we are tempted to become tired, discouraged and possibly even disillusioned.

When this happens, it means that we have lost a clear picture of the character, purposes and activity of the triune God. We act as if although once He graciously took us on, He is now a hard taskmaster, an employer with a list of things we are charged to complete. Although at first we saw that Jesus graciously did for us what we never could be for ourselves, somehow He has turned into just an example that we are to follow.

Once we are Christians does Jesus become, for all practical purposes, nothing more than a model, an example? Did His saving work really only create a potential for us to make real?

No. He created the reality of a faithful relationship that we are to continually receive by faith. God in Christ reveals to us His tremendous love for us His creatures, not to create the possibility of making us His children, but in the two movements of Christ’s ministry, to actually give us back our humanity in Him, healed, redeemed and transformed.

The Continuing Ministry of Christ

Jesus accomplished this work as our mediator and His continuing min-

istry is to continue to mediate this reality to us so that we might grow up into it.

I used to think of Jesus as basically retired. He did His work of redemption through the crucifixion and resurrection, and now He is, well, unemployed. But the New Testament is quite clear that this is false. Jesus ascended to the Father as Son of God and Son of Man, still in His glorified humanity and He now continues to be the One where God and humanity meet. God is unifying, reconciling all of creation in Jesus

I used to think of Jesus as basically retired. He did His work of redemption through the crucifixion and resurrection, and now He is, well, unemployed. But the New Testament is quite clear that this is false.

(Ephesians 1.10). Jesus, in and through the Spirit, is continually drawing us to the Father, and enabling us to share in all He has wrought for us on our behalf.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews spends a great deal of time talking about the ongoing ministry of Christ. Jesus is called our true high priest, who now lives “to make intercession” for us (Hebrews 7.25). In referring to Jesus in this way, the author is turning his readers toward the image of the Day of Atonement. On the Day of Atonement, the highest holy day of the Jewish year, the high priest entered into the very holy of holies to offer a sacrifice for the sins of all the people. On his breastplate were written the names of all the tribes, so that He takes with Him all the people into the very presence of God.

Jesus, as our true high priest, through His life, death, resurrection and ascension, leads us into the very presence of His Father, with our names written on His heart. We now live in Him and He in us so that where He is, we are truly and really represented. In Him we continually meet and know the Father. Jesus is not out looking for work, His ministry continues to this day, bringing the Father and Spirit to us and bringing us to the Father and the Spirit.

To sum up then:

Christ's ministry is to mediate God's good purposes for humanity to make us His children by grace, sharing in Christ's sonship. This work is His finished and His ongoing ministry. What Christ accomplishes for us and mediates to us in Him and through the Spirit, is a reality, not a potential. He gives to us and we receive from Him continually His completed work.

What does God expect of us?

Our Participation

God enables us to participate in His work and expects us to participate in faith, hope and love.

*He goes before us
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He goes before us and He works in us, enabling us to participate fully and with joy and faith. Jesus is our high priest, and in Him we are involved in the glorious work of drawing people into relationship with Him. This is why Peter calls us a royal priesthood (I Peter 2:5).

It is important to emphasize that we do not have our own ministry, our own priesthood, where we try to follow Christ's example. Christ gives us a share in His ministry and does all that is necessary to make us able to participate.

The Feeding of the 5,000: A Case Study in Ministry as Participation

Jesus, in revealing His nature and purposes, shows His disciples how they are to minister by sharing in His ministry. One great example of this is the feeding of the five thousand.

Read Mark 6:30 - 44

The context of this passage is the sending out of the twelve, in pairs, to preach and cast out demons (Mark 6:7-13). They had a successful time and returned to Jesus and told him "all that they had done and taught" (Mark 6:30). But it was difficult to have uninterrupted time together because of the constant crowds, so Jesus proposed that they withdraw to a more remote place together to rest. However, whatever hope the disciples

had of “alone time with Jesus” was dashed as they landed their boat.

Notice how Mark describes Jesus’ view of the crowd. How does he respond to them?

Who initiates bringing the teaching time to an end and why?

How does Jesus respond to the disciples’ suggestion to dismiss the crowd?

Look at the details Mark gives us in the rest of the story. Note what Jesus says and does and what the disciples do, and make two lists to organize what you find.

What do we learn from the story? To get the full message, it might be helpful to consider other ways the story could have gone.

First, how could Jesus have responded to the disciples’ incredulity? Well, there are two possibilities. First, He could have said, “Look, I have

Jesus gives them a task they are totally capable of doing.

given you a task and you need to figure out how to obey. I have been giving you an example to follow all this time, so follow it! I won’t be with you forever—it is time you learn how to get along without me here to do it for you. I will observe how you do and will give you feedback on your performance at the end.” In other words, Jesus could have thrown them back on themselves, teaching them that He provides nothing more than an example or potential for them. He could have taught them that their relationship with Him is most like servant to master.

Or Jesus could have said, “You know, you’re right. You can’t feed these people. I’ll just do it myself.”

But Jesus doesn’t do either of these. Instead He says to them, “How many loaves have you? Go and see.” **Jesus gives them a task they are to-**

tally capable of doing. And what do the disciples do? They obey Jesus.

Now let's consider how else the disciples might have responded. It must have seemed a bit foolish to them. They search around and come up with five loaves and two fish. But what is that in the face of so many hungry people?

They could have refused to give Jesus what they had because they were ashamed at how insufficient it was.

In looking at their meager resources, they could have been tempted to respond in two other ways. First, they could have refused to give Jesus what they had because they were ashamed at how insufficient it was. It was ludicrous to believe that this small bit of food was going to be of any real help!

Or they may have decided to stall Jesus while a few of them ran to the closest village to buy more food. If they could give Him more than just five loaves and two fish, maybe He would be more pleased with them. They may have thought it would be best to show Jesus that they were self-sufficient, that they could be counted on "to get the job done." Jesus would be relieved that He had chosen such competent, resourceful and efficient disciples!

Fortunately, the disciples did not choose either of these responses. They brought what they actually had, meager as it was, to Jesus and gave it to Him. And what happened? They saw Jesus take what they gave Him, offer it to the Father, and hand it back to them transformed. They saw, as they handed out the food and collected the leftovers after everyone had enough, just what Jesus was able to do with what they gave Him.

Do the disciples fulfill Jesus' command to feed the crowd? Yes, they do! Jesus doesn't just give them a command, He enables them to fulfill it. Jesus brings them along in His ministry, graciously making room for them to participate with Him.

This story is a sign of that wonderful exchange we have already talked about. It points us to the cross, where Jesus takes our broken and sinful lives, offers them up to the Father in Himself and gives them back to us, in the resurrection and ascension, now transformed in Him.

The feeding of the five thousand provides us with a wonderful picture of our ministry as a participation in Christ's ministry. What we see is that Jesus is already at work and we are invited and enabled to come along. As the disciples go through this experience with Jesus, their trust in Him, in His character and ability, grows. They come to count more and more on

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His capacity to use what they give Him for His good purposes. **The focus was not on what they had to give, but to whom they gave it.**

What Jesus reveals to the disciples in this incident is the very nature of their relationship with and therefore their ministry in Him. It wasn't a one time "I'll help you out now, but eventually you'll have to pull your

What we offer to Him is never more than loaves and fishes, but Jesus knows that and is confident in His ability to transform our offerings and our lives.

own weight."

They learn, and we learn, that all ministry is a participation in Christ's ministry. In deciding what to do, we can remember that Jesus is already at work in His church and in the world, and that He has and will continue to equip and enable us to come along. We never work **for** God, only **with** Him.

What we offer to Him is never more than loaves and fishes, but Jesus knows that and is confident in His ability to transform our offerings and our lives.

Trusting Him for Our Maturity As We Participate

In participating in the feeding of the five thousand, as in the rest of their interactions with Jesus, the disciples came to see more and more of the good character and purposes of the triune God and their ability to trust Him grew. In this way they matured, slowly over time.

I talked earlier about how Christ's work is both complete and continuing and that we are in the 'already' and 'not yet.' The New Testament writers talk a lot about maturity or sanctification. God's purpose is to bring us to full maturity as His beloved children. God's love loves us to perfection, that is, to perfect relationship.

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Often in the church, we are tempted to think that our own maturity to wholeness as God's children isn't that important. We are tempted to think, as Christians, that now that we are 'in' the kingdom, our whole

reason for being is to reach out and bring others in. This can lead to a ‘disconnect’ between our own spiritual healing and growth and our caring for others.

But this, again, is based on a faulty theology. When we think this way, it is likely that we do not have a firm grasp of our good, wonderful God and who we are in relation to Him. Again, we think that our relationship with God is primarily a working one. God needs us to serve Him and He mainly relates to us by giving us tasks to do.

Living in Christ, abiding in Christ is both the means and the end of our ministry. We never leave this behind! Jesus has united Himself to us, so that we are united to Him. We continually receive our lives, our re-

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demption, our sanctification and our ministry from and in Him.

The triune God is graciously and wholly committed to making us fully His children and wholly faithful to getting us there. His primary desire is for us to enjoy Him, know Him, and be with Him. Paul, in the beginning of his letter to the Philippians reassures them that God is faithful to do His work in us. “For I am convinced,” he writes, “that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Phil. 1:6).

Clearly, it is understood that our Christian life is a process of growing up more and more into the reality given us in Christ. God does not instantly change us. We participate in our sanctification, our becoming more and more Christ-like.

And we participate in this ministry of Christ’s while we ourselves are still maturing.

And we participate in this ministry of Christ’s while we ourselves are still maturing. In fact, we mature partly as a result of our involvement in Christ’s ministry. As we participate in His work in our lives and in the lives of others, we are blessed, we are able to grow in our trust of God.

We Participate by Faith

We participate by faith and the fruit of our participation is a greater, deeper faith, a greater vision of and love for God, and a greater ability to live in His joy and peace.

Our participation in ministry then is how the triune God grows us up — how He helps us to see His love, His faithfulness and how He helps us to grow in our trust of Him. And He is happy to have that be the case. He isn't thwarted in His work by "having to use imperfect people."

If the ministry of Christ is to draw us up into the triune relationship, to give us a share in His sonship, to make us children of God, then all our ministry should come out of this truth, reflect this truth and draw others and ourselves more deeply into this truth. And we do this by feeding people's faith in God, our own faith and the faith of others—by reflecting His character and purposes in what we do and in how we go about it.

When we study the gospels, we see that Jesus, the Son of God, participates in what His Father is doing out of love for and trust in the Father. That is because Jesus' relationship with the Father in the Spirit is a real love relationship, a giving and receiving that centers in trust. Jesus trusts His Father completely.

His life as the Son of God and as the Son of Man is lived out of that relationship. In the eleventh chapter of John's Gospel, we read of the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. John tells us that Jesus knew where He came from and where He was going and He knew that the Father had given all things into His hand. Therefore, He took the towel and water and washed their feet, a job of service so low that only a slave was expected to do it!

In John 5, Jesus says that He does nothing on His own but only what He sees the Father doing. Jesus' ministry is a participation with the Father in the Spirit! Our ministry is a participation with Christ in the Spirit! We act in and through our relationship with Him. We minister to others out of our knowing and receiving Christ's love and work in our lives. We act out of trust.

Therefore, **a growing trust in Jesus is at the center of our ministry.** We participate in the ministry of Christ by faith. We serve, we minister, out of trust that God is at work and that He will use all we offer Him. We hand Him all that we have, trusting that He knows what to do with it.

Our participation in ministry then is how the triune God grows us up . . .

Sometimes our loaves and fishes aren't just meager, they are rotting. Some days all I seem to have is anxiety, resentment, anger and a sense of not being able to forgive. But Jesus tells me to hand all that to Him as well. We hand Him our sin in repentance, our thanksgiving and prayer in

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worship, our selves in trust. We are never alone or on our own as Christians. We are to grab a hold of, receive, rest in, and act from the real, active presence of Jesus through His Spirit.

When we are struggling in our Christian lives, I find it is almost always due to a weak faith, which comes from a faulty picture of God. We fear that it is all up to us, that God is waiting for us to 'get our act together' and that He is disappointed with us. We get up each morning with the hopeless burden of trying again to close that gap between where we are and where we think we should be. We become anxious over the ministries we are involved in - will people get involved with us? Will the program grow and continue? Will we be able to feel that we succeeded?

We can trust Christ to already be at work — in us, in our relationships and in our churches and beyond. As we decide what to do in our ministry, what programs to begin, continue, or end, who to get involved, etc., we remind ourselves of His presence and activity by praying to see what He is already doing and how to get involved with that.

God is already working in the women of your church! He doesn't start in when we come up with our plan - trying to help us accomplish it. The triune God loves, delights in and is committed to working in each of the women in your care, including you. He is faithful to His own purposes for us, even when we are not. We are just working with Him, tuning in and catching up to what He is up to.

We can trust that God has enabled us to participate in His work. We can trust that He has not made a mistake in giving us the particular gifts

*We can trust that
God has enabled us
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work.*

and strengths that He has. So we can move forward with trust and even joyous anticipation. We ask, what would be the next step in helping these women grow in their knowledge of the gracious character and work of our God and in their trust and confidence in Him?

God knows and delights in each of us and is confident that the gifts He has given us can be used by Him to grow the faith of others and ourselves. The women's ministry at your church can grow out of, be shaped by, the particular and even perhaps limited gifts of the actual women who lead and are involved, rather than having to conform to some ideal that we think we have to attain.

In ministry, God does not throw you back on yourself.

In ministry, God does not throw you back on yourself. You can, every day, receive in prayer and study, His whole presence and work in your life. Jesus wants you to abide in Him because this is how you participate in His good work. And even when you are in the midst of "your" ministry, "your" work, you can continue to rest in Him, to look for where He is at work, to listen to His Spirit in the moment.

So make feeding your faith a priority of your ministry. We don't live on what we learned in the past or our doctrinal statements. In fact, if faithful, these statements point us towards living in the life Jesus shares with us, dynamically and truly, every moment of the day.

Study Scripture with an eye to seeing what it tells you about the triune God. In prayer, hand over the ministry along with all of those other concerns you find yourself tempted to carry alone. Ask others to remind you of who God is and who you are in relationship to Him. When you are anxious, overwhelmed, look away from yourself to Jesus and let Him draw out your trust in Him.

Feeding the Faith of Others

Christian ministry is always centered in Christ. What we want to do, whether we are speaking, teaching, organizing, discussing with a committee, finding others to help, or cleaning up after a function, is to reveal the heart of the triune God to others, so that their faith is fed.

When we emphasize getting people to 'do stuff' as our focus and goal, we can become tempted to motivate others, or even motivate ourselves out of guilt, fear and anxiety of what might result if we didn't do x, y or z. We can be tempted to believe that is how God is motivating us.

But as we saw in the last section, God desires to motivate us by a growing confidence in and rest in Him and what He is doing.

So we participate in Christ's work of growing faith in others. God motivates us by faith, hope, and love and this is how we want to motivate the women we serve. Faith is not only what we act from, but what we invite others into as well.

The Epistle writers spend more than half of their time reminding their readers about the character, purposes and faithfulness of the triune God.

The writers of the New Testament all ministered to their readers by feeding their faith in God. When I was a young Christian, I thought that the New Testament, especially the Epistles, were written with one thing in mind - to tell us what to do. But after awhile I realized that this is not true!

When we go to the Epistles, we find a curious thing. In all of them, the writers spend more than half of their time reminding their readers about the character, purposes and faithfulness of the triune God. Why is this curious? Because all of these Epistles are written to believers! Aren't they supposed to already know all of this? Why are the writers then taking up so much space with theology?

For instance, towards the beginning of his letter, James tells his readers that when they lack wisdom they should pray. But he doesn't stop there. He goes on to remind them who this God is they are praying to. He tells them to ask God, "who gives to all, generously and without re-

Drawing people closer to God is what He is up to, not merely changing their behavior.

proach" (James 1. 5). Now why does James do this? Why isn't it enough to tell them to pray?

To help them respond as children to their loving heavenly Father, James reminds them of God's character. **Drawing people closer to God is what He is up to, not merely changing their behavior.** The best way to draw others into prayer is not to begin with techniques, but to give them a vision of the Father who is present and ready to listen to their prayers, of the Son who takes their prayers and offers them to the Father

and of the Spirit who intercedes for them.

This is why the authors of the New Testament wrote as they did - to help Christians to see more clearly the reality of Jesus and His work in the midst of the conflicting messages that they were hearing about them. The writers knew how easy it is for the believers to lose sight of the God they had started to follow. But, more importantly, the writers of the New Testament keep their focus on the person of Jesus Christ because a growing trust relationship with Him as our true elder brother is what the Christian life is all about! Our ministries should come out of this reality and our involvement should feed and grow our life in this reality.

Ministry is Like Watching A Sunset

Several years ago, my family hiked to the top of Sentinel Dome in Yosemite, California in the late afternoon in order to see the sun go down. It is the perfect viewing place because you can see for miles, 360 degrees around you.

It was the most amazing sunset I have ever seen in my life! The whole sky seemed to be in flames around us. We were absolutely mesmerized. The small crowd gathered with us had all been quiet while we waited for the sun to go down, but once the brilliant show started, everyone was up moving around. Total strangers were exclaiming to one another, “Isn’t this beautiful?” “Have you ever seen anything like this?”

How do we learn to enjoy a sunset? Do we have to take classes or read books? When we go to see a sunset, is there someone there to instruct us on the proper way to appreciate what we are about to see? Would it be sensible for someone to try to get you to enjoy the sunset that is occurring outside of your home, all the while drawing the curtains so that you cannot see?

The only way to enjoy a sunset is to go and see one!

The only way to enjoy a sunset is to go and see one! We don’t have to work up a response to it, the response is drawn out of us as we watch it. This is a great image for our ministry.

We participate in ministry by keeping the center of our work, our relationships, our activities in Christ. **We point, again and again, to the heart, the purposes, and the work of the triune God**, trusting that He will draw out a response of faith in us and in others.

Reflection Questions

1. If Christ's ministry is to mediate God's intentions to make us His children by grace, how does that impact the priorities you have in the ministry you lead?
2. Where is Christ's ongoing ministry reflected in the ministry you lead? Where is it reflected throughout the life of your church?
3. Identify those places where you recognize the reality of what Christ has accomplished for us and mediates to us through the Spirit.
4. What is the most challenging aspect of this foundational piece on the theology of ministry to your way of thinking?
5. What further questions are raised for you and what are the ways you can seek to have them answered?

Get To Know The Writer

Cathy Deddo is married with three children, only one still at home. She is a graduate of the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Cathy received Biblical and theological training from Fuller Theological Seminary where she completed an MA degree. Cathy's full-time ministry began as a campus staff member doing inter-denominational ministry for Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship.

She has taught the Bible for a wide variety of age groups and in many different contexts: neighborhoods, churches, retreats, conferences and on university campuses. Cathy has led leadership training seminars for small groups and for leadership development in the church context. She divides her time between home schooling her youngest daughter and teaching women's Bible studies. Cathy has a passion for helping women to see more deeply into the good character and work of the triune God.

For Further Reading: Faith and Theology

Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace by James Torrance

Crucifixion of Ministry by Andrew Purves

Ministry in the Image of God by Stephen Seamands

Attributes of God by Arthur W. Pink

Chosen by God by R.C. Sproul

Christ of the Covenants by O. Palmer Robertson

Concise Theology by J.I. Packer

If God Already Knows – Why Pray? by Douglas Kelly

Is God Really in Control? by Jerry Bridges

Knowing God by J. I. Packer

Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis

No Other God by John Frame

Orthodoxy by G. K. Chesterton

Prayer by Philip Yancey

Salvation Belongs to the Lord by John Frame

The Gagging of God by D. A. Carson

The Gospel of Ruth by Carolyn Custis James

The Holy Spirit by Sinclair Ferguson

The Sovereignty of God by Arthur W. Pink

When Life and Beliefs Collide by Carolyn Custis James