

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Ministry and Future: Contradictions and Hope

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Theological Discussion and the Responsibility  
of the Church

RICHARD L. JESKE

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review Articles

Book Review

Vol. XXXVII

July—August 1966

No. 7

# Ministry and Future: Contradictions and Hope

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Now men celebrate an event in time: traversing the years from *Log Cabin to Luther Tower*. Apparent contradictions abound: the cabin, a modest and diffident statement of an exile group. The tower, an ambitious and almost proud statement of a people with a sense of arrival. Men remember both and looking at them together see what they might otherwise have overlooked: the investment of hope in a ministry.

Now men celebrate a fact in space: the Luther Tower, vertical and stolid; the ministry sent from this place to the horizons, hopefully dynamic. Apparent contradictions abound again: the tower implies a fortress church, a community with a memory, a community that marks its life with signs of beauty and even of extravagance. The ministry implies tents, caves, houses, streets, a community with a task, a community that marks its life with signs of sacrifice and even of final self-giving.

"It is a fact of experience," say Ignatius Loyola, "that where contradictions abound, there also flowers the fairest hope." The contradictions between cabin and tower, extravagance and sacrifice, are occasions for

hope that we can see something about the nature of ministry that we might otherwise have overlooked.

Without the experience of extremes, of the apparent opposites out of which contradictions are made, learning is rare. Let the cabins, towers, extravagances, and sacrifices — all creatively jumbled together now — serve as a parable for the venture ahead. Can we pose a number of contradictions in today's ministry so radically that they will provide occasions for discernments out of which hope can grow?

We ask the radical question: under what circumstances can ministry legitimately be abandoned today? The question is appropriate because many have abandoned it and because others look to it without hope. People who recognize the brevity of life, who care to make it count, are constantly busy appraising their vocation: Is the ministry valid, or should it be abandoned? I shall suggest four circumstances (though there may be others not directly implied in these) whose occurrence would mean the end of ministry. Each hypothetical occurrence has its roots in present-day experience, and each experience is marked by contradiction.

First, ministry ends with the end of history. When the end comes, we can legitimately talk of the end of ministry as we now know it. Second, ministry should end if the Word which enlivens it is withdrawn. A third circumstance which makes abandonment of ministry the only proper

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alternative would be the disappearance of the believing community. Finally, when need for activity represented by ministry is no longer present or when it can be met in some other way, ministry can be discarded. Take them in order.

### I

The end of history would mean the end of ministry. The end has not occurred, and ministry continues; but attitudes toward the end condition approaches to ministry. Ministry is meaningless if it is confined to "my history." As Günther Bornkamm says, "The new history of Christ into which I am incorporated begins and ends in heaven; in its basis and goal it radically surpasses my history and the understanding of my existence." Approach to ministry depends on one's view of "the end" and of the intervening time. And wildly opposing, radically contradictory views — both apparently plausible — now contend for people's attention. In this contradiction, is there hope?

On the one hand, today more than often before, there is a sense of progress toward fulfillment in history. Whatever the minister says, he cannot deprive the people in our culture of their habit of mind revealed in the new spirit of renascence, of openness. The technological society breeds this attitude, and churchly pessimism seems ineffective against it. There at the end of the vision is Teilhard de Chardin pointing to "Omega point," the consummation of evolution and complexity in the glorious Christ Himself. Such a vision somehow seems to absorb contingencies, malignancies, setbacks, world wars: the human story elides into a grand fulfillment. There, half-way along to Omega point, stand secular

prophets like Peter Drucker and C. E. Ayres, who tell us that the technological continuum is the source and norm of truth and value: that man's problem-solving necessity and ability is the activity out of which ultimate answers are to come. There, at the beginning of this vision, are countless useful people, partaking of a new optimism and attracted to their own achievements.

The minister intrudes upon such a scene. He competes with these visionaries and practical men; he competes for the future — he also "knows" something about where history is going and is called to prophesy. He knows that all things cohere in Christ, that the beginning and the end belong to Him; he knows that the technological continuum may very well be an expression of man's increasing dominion over nature, under a divine mandate; he drives the Oldsmobile and takes his child to the hospital, hopeful that these artifacts of a problem-solving culture can be of service to him.

Shall he breathe a word concerning dimensions of history overlooked by the new optimists about progress and about the end? He is given a charter to rejoice in creation and in man's achievement, but he knows he is called to violate the easygoing spirit. But shall he conjure up false gloom, be seen to be defensive and crabby? By what right does he intrude, and with what style does he transcend the process of which he is himself the part? How does he serve by calling into question the basis of practical human life today?

Over against these new renascence men stands another school, in open contradiction. Thus Erich Kahler: "*For the first time the human world is technically one, but at the same time in a state of wildest*

*anarchy. And Western civilization is about to conquer the globe and gradually extirpate the old customs, the peculiar cultural heritage of other peoples, while the West at home, in its own domain, shows unmistakable signs of degeneration.*" For every Teilhard there is a Lewis Mumford, ready to talk about "Necropolis" — the city of death, the city which ends the human story in a different way. For every Drucker or Ayres there is a Bertrand Russell or William Fulbright to remind man of the lethal character of technology, of the falsehood and value-destruction found along the technological continuum. For every practical problem-solver there are scores of people bored by the new leisure, burdened by automation, fearful of cybernetics, enraged about polluted streams and polluted air, shadowed by divorce, worried about tumors.

Contradictions abound. There "flowers the fairest hope." For the extremes we have portrayed point to two dimensions of life to which a Christian minister ministers. They stand in boldest outline today, extremes, exaggerating — as do the cabin and the tower — so that we may discern. Every minister, whenever he steps into the circle with a Word, whenever he counsels or listens, is in a situation wherein his own purported expertise is demanded more urgently than before. With the affirmers he affirms creation and man's achievement: He is eucharistic, tasting, thanking, enjoying, endowing. With the apocalypticists he knows and sees the end and man's self-destruction, the demonic and the limiting. Ministry is built in part on the need to minister to people who regularly forget one or the other extremes or who are anxious, torn between them.

At such a moment, why should anyone think of abandoning ministry? For good reasons: If one can gain the discernment or vision elsewhere more clearly, more honestly, more efficiently, he should serve elsewhere. And people do turn to journalists and politicians, novelists and city-planners when they lose confidence in ministers to do justice to both kinds of reality. Christian ministers are given no license to sulk as creation unfolds and no charter for despair as destruction is imminent. I would think that every theological professor, every student, every professional or nonprofessional minister would find these years times of hope. In their extremes these times play into their hands. If they wish to sulk, let them sulk for letting the ministerial union abdicate its role for having failed to provide doers and seers. When ministry is bland, safe, studied, political, bet-hedging, there is little hope that it can participate in the drama of salvation-history or even of plain, ordinary history. I see no limits imposed by logic or destiny against a concerned ministry's recovery of the ability to discern in a moment of anarchy and contradiction. But this discernment is not to be a gift only for the satisfaction of the seer who foresees an end; he is a minister — for others.

## II

A second circumstance which could plausibly lead to the abandonment of ministry has to do with the withdrawal of the Word. Here again contradictions abound. Men as seldom before complain of "the problem of God" — the absence, silence, remoteness, eclipse, or death of God. But others on the scene urge that never has man been better poised to hear the Word

than in the post-modern situation. In such a contradiction, is there hope? In these exaggerated extremes, is there occasion for disclosure, response to revelation?

When I speak of "withdrawal of the Word," I do not mean that the Scripture disappears, that words no longer are preached or taught, that their authority is removed. I refer to the demonstrable event of our time, that man reads and hears, but the mark of authentication, the voice behind the vehicle, the reality of the Other disintegrates. Karl Jaspers speaks of this as "shipwreck," when even minimal intelligibility about meaning and order and life in the world disappears, when all approaches to the Transcendent are removed. Jaspers speaks of "ciphers"—ordinary finite events which point beyond themselves. They lead symbolically to Transcendence. "Shipwreck" occurs when all the ciphers are silent, when chaos and frustration reign, when godless man appears on the scene, when "cosmic aridity" and sterility mark an era.

You have not been observant, have not listened to the decent godless people of the churches or the decent godless people of the faculties or to the complaints or boasts of people of the theater in the post-modern world—and maybe you have not searched your own heart—if you have not had some evidence or experience of "shipwreck." Is this the end of the "secular" experience? Is man pointing, as Bonhoeffer said he would, toward final nonreligiousness, in which God does not appear and Christ appears out of continuity with His previous manifestations?

A moment in which this worldliness of the world and homelessness of man is a public phenomenon, stirring press and

world, should be a moment of meaning for every minister. In classroom, at bedside, in personal and in public relationships, he speaks *after* the experience of "shipwreck." He has stared at sacred pages, has spoken into a void, has quietly let fonts of experience in himself dry up; he has whimpered or raged as a homeless one himself. Or at least his predecessors among prophets and apostles often seem to have done so. Now people turn to him, now and then, for comment and expertise. Rightfully he shrugs off some of the sillier expressions of the problem and solution. But has he done justice to the question of the extent and depth of the "shipwreck" experience? If not, will he find people who sense empathy or honesty in him?

But people are not only godless, secular, happy agnostics or homeless and shipwrecked; our world is also full of wildest religious expressions. If over against the godless the ministry today finds its word of religion newly meaningful, so in a religion-clotted world the ministry is exorcist, protestant, iconoclast: the minister shatters the images and denounces the idols and helps man move "beyond religion" to the plain of freedom where the victorious Christ asks for disciples.

The world full of religion? Why not see it that way, with nationalism and communism competing on all the terms the old religions employed; with astrology and the passion for entertainment, old religions and nascent religions, and new religions Soka Gakkai and Black Muslim-ry—competing for attention? In such an angle of vision godless, secular man is hard to find. He often seems compulsive, haunted and hunted—or at least slightly edgy over the

question whether he has covered all his bets, anticipated every omen and inkling.

For every Bonhoeffer there is a Mircea Eliade, for all who see man "beyond religion" there are counterparts who see a bewildering array of religions. This is true in the local community, where ministers in our culture serve: if John Birch or the Freemasons do not offer surrogate religions, Little League or the Investment Club may. But not all is lost even in the competition of religiousnesses and religiosities. A gifted spiritual counselor in today's ministry will be there with the "language people" watching for "disclosure situations"; he will be there with the phenomenologists, seeing response to revelation disclosed in "the experience of human consciousness"; he will have a stake in what Karl Rahner calls "anthropological transcendence" and in what Bernard Lonergan calls "insight."

His will be a listening ministry; he will carry back advice from the field (as the missionaries used to call it). He will listen for characteristic language of religion among the contemporaries who work most with the language of the new day. He may have to declare, "whom you ignorantly worship, Him we declare unto you," and he may eventually have to sweep the shelf clear of the household gods—even if these are represented by flags, securities, Mother's Day cards, or confirmation certificates. He will ultimately find himself taking a negative view of human religion, including the cultural forms which people make of the Christian faith and experience—of anything which helps rule out the experience of the living God. But in the meantime he will listen as men speak of the gods and of God. His ministry will be informed. He can be of most service to

people as he stands aware of the contradiction between occasions of nonreligiousness and occasions of wild religiosity. Having listened, he will be more ready to speak a word congruent with *the* Word at a moment when many say that the Word has been withdrawn, when God is silent.

### III

There flowers the fairest hope, we are suggesting with Loyola, where contradictions abound. We suggested that ministry could disappear if the believing community disappeared. We know the end has not come; we believe the Word has not been withdrawn; we are more ambiguous about tests for the believing community. Contradictions are present here, between the signs that a captive and disoriented church alone survives on the one hand and signs that a free and mobile community is being born on the other.

Most talk of abandonment of ministry in our time has come from men and women who feel that the inherited institutions of the church mask irreligion, guarantee and sanction bad faith, exist to keep men from Christ and from *metanoia*, repentance and a real turning. Since professional ministers serve the community related to these institutions, we hear of a "functional crisis" or "vocational crisis" among ministers today. Can one not more efficiently and honestly serve the purposes of Christ by repudiating such community?

Not all the problems of the community-in-institutional-context are problems of malice or lethargy. Sometimes the fates seem to be against community. Almost every trend to which one can point: high-rise apartments, isolation in cities, the two-car, one-boat leisure culture; the antichris-

tian anticolonial forces of the world; the population growth of the non-Christian world—almost all these run against historic ways of conceiving of the believing community. People who do look for community claim to find it more profoundly at cocktail parties than at Communion—or at least than at church suppers. They find outlets for service to be more meaningful almost everywhere outside the community to which faith gives rise. They see residual Christianity as a sociological phenomenon—its outlines predictable on class, ethnic, or economic lines. Where is “faith” or “belief” in the community that exists as The Pure Doctrine Club, The Justification by Faith Club, The Club of Like-Minded Middle-Class Teutons if these clubs call themselves churches but seem to be constituted by almost everything except the Word they claim as their own? Young professional ministers who survey the situation more than anywhere else choose this point to speak of abandonment.

Contradiction: in our time there are also signs that a *diaspora* church is forming. Here and there a person, a cell, a congregation, a cluster of congregations, a seminary, a college, a nursery bears some mark: it is belief in the activity of a living God in Christ that moves these people! Ministers have experienced, in the “God versus non-god” talk on campus, in quiet Christian witness of church members, in the word of compatriots in freedom marches, in inner-city experiments, some frail signs at least that new kinds of community are being constituted. Most people in “sociological Christianity”—to paraphrase George Tvard’s word for automatic, unreflective Catholicism—will rebel against these forms and their evidences of com-

munity. I cannot see why a minister feels he can abandon these rebels against the new creation. But I can also see no reason for him to remain in ministry except to transform them, to give them occasion to question the basis of their community and, it is hoped, to discover new community. The minister today can be of greatest service when he comes to understand what constitutes community, when he looks for signs of faith in the formal, apparently faithful church; when he brings it into communion with what he hopes is becoming a believing community, not merely a “saved” but a “saving” Remnant. At such a juncture, with such a charter, reasons for abandoning ministry can be minimized.

#### IV

A fourth occasion for abandoning ministry would be the disappearance of need. When people no longer need service, “souls saved,” rescue, help, discernment, disclosure, discovery, or when they can find these needs fulfilled better elsewhere, then ministry can disappear. Under this topic I wish to take up the contradictions related to our time’s discussion of “professional” ministry. Consistently I have spoken not of ordained ministry, or of clergy-laity distinctions, but of “professional ministry,” for here problems and possibilities are most evident.

On the one hand people see contradiction in the term “professional ministry” itself; how can one be a professional, have a vocation (with pay) to engage in radical service? Can people trust someone who is employed to discern, disclose, discover? Ministers can do much to provide answers to these questions by refusing to satisfy conventional expectations. Conventional

congregations in our culture expect the minister as professional to prostitute his gifts, to trivialize himself, to be ticket salesman, shill, mere diplomat, tea sipper, utterer of safe banalities.

When the minister, without evidence of pride, runs counter to these expectations; when he lives under spiritual discipline, manifests his gifts, is seen to possess a secret, is willing for the right reason to inconvenience people in power—then his professional status no longer stigmatizes. It confuses, and in that confusion there is hope.

For from the other side of this contradiction there is a school of thought that understands ministry precisely when it is professional. I refer to the opportunity provided by a technical, specialized society which turns to a man and asks, "What, specifically, do you do?" When the minister gives specific answers which run counter to cultural expectation, he has a conversation going out of which meaning and ministry can emerge.

"I talk about God. I hold people's hands when they die. I make up foolish words about virgins and gallows and empty tombs. I look for God in a godless world. I minister to a believing community hidden behind the signs you see of a walled-in lifeless church. I sit up all night talking about problems. I have a clear job description. I get paid for doing this, for supplementing nonprofessional ministry. People back me, hopeful that if I fulfill my job description, great numbers of better-equipped witnesses and servants will be turned loose in the world. What do you do?"—I do not know exactly what words of translation would be appropriate. Each minister can find his own. He stands be-

tween those who find professional ministry repugnant and those who can only understand something about a kind of ministry because they can only understand professional fulfillment of job description.

The final test will come not in the authority with which the minister dispenses orders or shouts from pulpits or holds meetings. An African saying has a word for custodians of the church's treasure: "Guardianship is not to give an order but to give one's self." *Then* there flowers the fairest hope.

In these words we have deliberately set aside professional ministry; in theory and in practice in the church this setting aside would not be so neat or radical or clear. I see "ministry" somewhat in the pioneering or nuclear picture described by Anthony Terrell Hanson: "The ministry is the pioneer Church. The apostles had their apostolic mission not because they were to be rulers of a Church that did not yet exist, but because they were themselves the nucleus of that Church." They knew contradiction, just as did the men who best fulfill our ideal of ministry in the past 125 years from this center marked by a cabin, a tower.

None of us knows exactly how to prescribe for ministry at a time of rapid cultural change. I like to proceed on the basis of case studies, after observing present and existent men who fulfill ministry. Without doubt, were we able somehow tonight to convoke a gathering of those who have served best, who would stir us most, to whom we would turn, we would find common marks among them. They might not have been the most successful, the most glib, the most prominent. They would, all of them, have helped people affirm and de-

nounce; they would have spoken a fresh Word in a weary world; they would have worked for recognition of authentic faith as a basis for community; they would have worn the marks of their profession lightly, not having given orders but having given self.

This whole Loyolan idea of hope and discernment born of contradiction applies not only to an event in which we bring together the memory of 125 years ago and now, of cabin and tower as apparent opposing symbols. It is not merely the cherished methodological device of some phi-

losophers and educators in our time. It has been a mark of ministry since pioneering days; thus St. Paul saw the abounding of contradiction and the flowering of hope as he implied ministry and future:

"We are treated as impostors and yet are true; as unknown and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished and yet not killed; as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing and yet possessing everything."

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