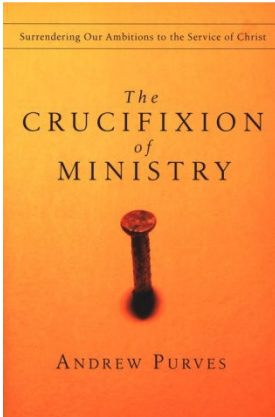


THE CALL TO PASTORAL MINISTRY, part two

GCI pastoral intern discussion starter

by Ted Johnston



Recommended reading:
The Crucifixion of Ministry
by Andrew Purves,
Pages 11-72

Last time I shared the story of my calling to pastoral ministry. We then gleaned insights from Os Guinness' book, *The Call*. One of the most important is that God calls us to himself—to a life that is *by him, to him* and *for him*. As we embrace and follow him, he reveals what he has for us to do *with him*.

An understanding that ministry is not merely what we do *for* God, but what we do *with* God, has unfolded in my life over time and has transformed my approach to ministry and all of life. Let me explain.

From the beginning, I viewed my call to ministry in a deeply personal way. As I mentioned last time, God grabbed hold of me and would not let go. My sense at the time was, "I must obey." Therefore, I did.

In the early years of my ministry, my thought was, "Lord, I must do this for you!" Do not get me wrong—I deeply enjoyed my service to Christ. However, I viewed it as *my* ministry. From my perspective at the time, Christ was in heaven—closely watching what I was doing and sending help when needed—but not personally present.

Then my understanding began to change. At first, the change came through experience. I remember times when I would be sitting with church members in counseling, or in a funeral home, or at a hospital bedside, and there I came face-to-face with some of life's most difficult, tragic situations—ones way beyond my experience and ability. Yet, as I sat with them, often in befuddled silence, I would have the unmistakable sense of God's personal presence. I would experience him being right there, ministering to this congregant. It was as though there were three people in the room—the member in need, me the pastor and Jesus himself.

In the early years of my ministry, I did not have the theology to adequately explain what I was experiencing. The theology I held at the time viewed Jesus as caring, yet as distant—the one who had ascended, leaving us here on earth to minister on his behalf. Yes, he would send resources (spiritual gifts, power, etc.) and, yes, we had access to him through prayer. Yet Jesus was far away in heaven; not here.



Despite my rather faulty theology, I continued to experience Jesus' personal presence. Then, thank God, my eyes were opened to a theology that not only explained my experience, but greatly enhanced it.

My growth in understanding began with a study of the doctrine of the Trinity. I came to appreciate the nature of God as the loving union of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit—one God; three persons. For me, one of the most important aspects of this understanding was to realize for the first time that the Holy Spirit is not merely the power of God but God in person. When we "have" the Holy Spirit, we have God himself.

As a result of this understanding, my perspective on ministry changed. I began to experience it less as what I was doing *for* God (with some power that he provides),

and more and more as what I was doing moment-by-moment *with* God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

There was great comfort and joy in this realization. However, there was more to know about God and about ministry. A few years after my study of the Trinity, I was introduced to what we in GCI refer to as “Incarnational Trinitarian Theology.” This theology is centered on Jesus Christ—emphasizing his humanity (the doctrine of the Incarnation) and his divinity (the doctrine of the Trinity). These doctrines tell us not only about Jesus himself, but about all humanity, because through Jesus’ divinity (which is eternal) and his incarnation (which continues) all humanity is united to God, in Christ, by the Spirit.

You are probably familiar with this theology, but if not, I urge you to read GCI’s booklet, *The God Revealed in Jesus Christ*—you will find it on the GCI.org website. Viewing God, humanity and all creation through the “lens” of this theology has radically transformed how I see all things, including Christian ministry.

Trinitarian theologian and seminary professor Andrew Purves writes from an incarnational, Trinitarian vantage point in his book, *The Crucifixion of Ministry*. I urge you to read the whole book, but if you do not have time now, please do read pages 11-72.

Purves urges us to recognize that the eternal Son of God (we know him as Jesus Christ), through his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit, has united himself to all humanity. That means that he is, through the Holy Spirit, personally present with and ministering to all people—some who know it, and many who do not. Jesus is actively ministering on earth, through the Spirit, in ways that are fulfilling the Father’s mission to the world.

Here is where you and I come in. As followers of Jesus, we are called and gifted by the Holy Spirit to share with our Lord in the ministry that he is now doing in people’s lives. Purves urges us to crucify (put to death) any ideas that we might hold about this being “my ministry.” Doing so is essential if we are to trust fully in Jesus, and in doing so, to participate in Jesus’ ongoing ministry in the world.

As I have more deeply understood and sought to live out of this stunning truth, my ministry has been transformed. Now my early experience of Jesus’ personal presence in ministry were being explained and affirmed--being made much more “real.”

Now when I am with people, I am looking for what Jesus is already doing in their lives and I try to listen for my Savior’s call to join with him, through the Spirit, in what he is doing. What joy that is! And what challenge!

May you hear God’s call to that ministry! May you experience the personal presence and activity of our Triune God and then share actively in what Jesus is doing, in the Holy Spirit, to fulfill the Father’s mission.

Discussion Starter Questions

Please read Purves, pages 11-72 and discuss your understanding of the following key points:

1. “The first and central question in thinking about ministry is *Who is Jesus Christ and what is he up to?*” (p. 13).
2. “If anything worthwhile is to happen, Jesus has to show up...Only the ministry of Jesus is redemptive” (p. 9).
3. “Ministry should be understood as a sharing in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ, for wherever Christ is, there is the church and her ministry” (p. 11).
4. “The crucifixion of our ministry is staggering good news. Now ministry is...possible for us, probably for the first time, as gospel” (p. 26).
5. “Don’t preach to grow your congregation; preach to bear witness to what the Lord is doing, and let him grow your church.... Develop a Christological hermeneutic for all you do and say” (pp. 44, 45).
6. Why is the question, *What would Jesus Do?* inadequate and misleading? (p. 51).
7. “It is not our ministries that make Christ present; it is the present, living Christ who makes our ministries possible” (p. 53).