

INTRODUCTION

Has God Killed Your Ministry Yet?



THE CRUCIFIXION OF MINISTRY IS GOOD NEWS! My goal in this book is to offer a perspective on ministry and illustrate a practice that liberates ministers from the grind of feeling that “it’s all up to me.” I have two themes:

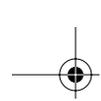
1. Conceiving ministry as *our* ministry is the root problem of what ails us in ministry today.
2. Ministry should be understood as a sharing in the continuing ministry of Jesus Christ, for wherever Christ is, there is the church and her ministry.

I intend for my writing to be readily accessible to busy, tired, somewhat depressed, midcareer and fed-up ministers who can’t carry the load of ministry any longer. I hope that some self-styled successful ministers will also read it and find a wholly new way to be in ministry.

WHAT GOD IS UP TO

I begin where ministry must always begin, with the practice of God. By that I mean *what God is up to*. The practice of God is not an easy concept. The most important point is this: God is an actor in our





present experience. We would not know God otherwise. Do I believe that Jesus is the living, reigning and acting Lord? Everything hinges on a positive answer.

The question involves an *either-or*. Here is the *either*: If Jesus is properly understood to be nothing more than a continuing moral influence, then it is up to us to actualize and achieve everything in faith, life and ministry. Jesus becomes powerless and is of little help. Like a fossil trapped in amber, Jesus is locked into an abstract and theoretical theological system. He is an idea which we must somehow incarnate as best we can to make him and his cause effective today. Having given us a moral code and ministerial imperatives, he now sits on the sidelines of the cosmos, arms folded, waiting for us to do something. The best we can hope for is a cheerleader Christ. He cheers us on when we do well, but he is not involved in the game.

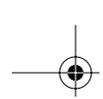
Get Jesus wrong by consigning him to be only metaphorically alive as a continuing moral influence, and what is left? A ministry experience that inevitably bounces between guilt and burnout. We labor under the weight of the ministerial imperative: *do it*. But we soon discover we can't do it at all.

Now here is the *or*: Jesus is God active in the life of the world, in our personal lives and in ministry at every turn. The issue is not *How does Jesus get in on our ministries?* Instead, because he is the living and reigning Lord, the issue is now *What is he up to, and how do I hitch a ride on whatever he is up to?*

WHERE CHRIST IS, THERE IS THE CHURCH

We find the answers in the classical Christian doctrines of our participation through union with Christ in his vicarious humanity and ministry. Everything is cast back on to him, onto God who is present for us by the Spirit, onto Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Because ministry is what Jesus does, ministry is properly un-





derstood as gospel rather than law and as grace rather than obligation.

The first and central question in thinking about ministry is *Who is Jesus Christ and what is he up to?* The answer leads to the second question: *How do we get in on Jesus' ministry?* This is my way of restating a very old doctrine. It is thought to have been stated first by Ignatius of Antioch from the end of the first Christian century at the close of the apostolic age: *Where Christ is, there is the church (ubi Christus, ibi ecclesia)*. We can also mimic how the twentieth century Swiss theologian Karl Barth said it: *It is not Jesus Christ who needs our ministries; it is our ministries that need Jesus Christ*. So my dictum is *Wherever Christ is present in ministry, there my ministry may be found*. It is the implication for ministry in Jesus' words, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).



DISPLACED MINISTRY

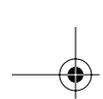
Exploring these issues will bring us to the difficult awareness that our ministries must be displaced by the ministry of Jesus. Displacement is more than relinquishment. Displacement is not an invitation to let Jesus take over by letting him in on our territory. Rather, we must be bumped aside firmly, perhaps mortifyingly. Otherwise we will never let go of our grip on our ministries. We are too attached to them and to their payoff, even if at times the payoff is negative.

Displacement literally means the death of our ministries. All that we think we *should* do and *can* do and *are doing* in ministry must be put to death. Why? Because too often our ministries are in the way. Even when we conduct them from the best spiritual, therapeutic and moral motives, they are not redemptive. Only the ministry of Jesus is redemptive.

CRUCIFIXION: GOOD NEWS

I call the process of displacement "the crucifixion of ministry" be-





cause in Christian thought crucifixion carries the concept of redemption. The crucifixion of Jesus is staggering good news of our salvation. The crucifixion of ministry by the process of painful displacement by the ministry of Jesus is staggering good news for ministers and for the people among whom we minister. The crucifixion of ministry is the ground for the redemption of our ministries. For us, the ministers, it is the source of hope, joy and peace in our service.

None of this should come as a surprise. Jesus told us to take up our cross daily—to die daily—and follow him (Luke 9:23). Paul writes of being crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:19). Why would our ministries not be included in that crucifixion?

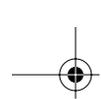
The Christian theology of baptism reminds us that as we have died with Christ, so also we will be raised with Christ (Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12). Paul sums up all Christian living this way: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). We should expect that our ministries too should die, even be killed, that they may be raised with Christ.

YOU JUST NAILED ME!

When I speak at conferences about the crucifixion of ministry, ministers often approach me afterward and say, “You just nailed me!” It is an especially appropriate response to the idea of the crucifixion of ministry! I find, however, that seminary students rarely internalize and appropriate the lesson of the crucifixion of ministry and the theology behind it. Perhaps we have to be bashed about in ministry for a while before we learn that the crucifixion of ministry is God’s gift.

The theology of the vicarious humanity and ministry of Christ, which is the theological foundation for much of my argument, is not difficult to grasp at a cognitive level, but it is difficult to internalize so that it begins to deeply and redemptively form our ministry. A former Doctor of Ministry student wrote to me that “I find it easy to talk a





good game about how Christ is the one sanctifying us, but more often than I care to admit, in practice I minister like a Pelagian.” The truth of Christ in our stead must convert us in heart and mind, seeping deeply into our ministerial souls, until it reorders our homiletical and pastoral practice according to the ministry of the living, acting and reigning Lord Jesus.

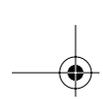
A DULL CHRISTMAS EVE

Cathy, my wife, is minister of a small urban Presbyterian congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was sitting with my adult children during a moderately dull Christmas Eve service. The attendance was rather poor. The choir seemed a bit off and unenergetic. At the beginning of the sermon a couple of under-fives got free from their parents and began to noisily roam the pews, which was charming but made it hard to concentrate on what Cathy was saying.

Later that night I confessed to Cathy that I had really struggled with my annoyance at small congregations. I recall thinking, “I bet my friend Craig Barnes at Shadyside [a large, prosperous city congregation] is putting on a great show tonight.” Then a truth dawned on me! I had spent part of the day writing this chapter, and in the evening I had already forgotten what I had written.

I came into the Christmas Eve service demanding excellence in musical and homiletical performance. My attitude was *What will they do to give me a Christmas Eve spiritual high?* With a prideful sense of entitlement I had focused on the ministry of the musicians and the preacher. I realized with sadness that I had looked at the finger rather than at what the finger was pointing to, the ministry of God with and for us. The service was not about the choir’s performance, the quality of the sermon (which actually was very good) or the meditative calm of the sanctuary. It was about the celebration of the birth of Emmanuel, who in the Spirit was present there with us. And I had missed it!





CHRIST'S MINISTRY IN OUR PLACE

We have to move away from thinking about ministry and all its attendant strategies, programs and processes, and think rather of Christ's ministry in our place and what it means that we are connected to him. The form and content of our ministry will then take an explicitly christological content and shape. The change is hard for us because it means that ministry is no longer about us and our skills. It is now about the *real presence* of Jesus Christ, whenever and wherever in his gracious freedom and love he is Emmanuel, God *with* us. The actuality of his ministry is what makes our ministry possible.

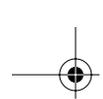
Today we are living and serving through a very difficult time. It is difficult because of the decline of the huge intellectual experiment called the Enlightenment, the emergence of postmodernity and the breakdown of all the great systems of thought that characterized the modern age. In that context my goal is to affirm and explore for the practice of ministry the radically converting truth spoken by John the Baptist, "He [Jesus] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

CLERGY BURNOUT

What is happening to us, we who are the ministers of Jesus Christ? Many of us are professionally, spiritually and financially depressed. The figures produced by studies only serve to quantify what we have bitterly experienced for ourselves. Something is very wrong, and the costs—personal, spiritual, familial and financial, as well as congregational—are terrifying.

For example, one respected study concluded that around 40 percent of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod clergy suffer from mild to severe burnout. From my experience teaching doctor of ministry students for a quarter of a century, I believe the same experience is common across all denominations. Our stress levels are at a medically significant level. Denominational health insurance agencies report that



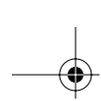


medical costs for clergy are higher than for any other professional group!

Another report, a summary of which was written by Michael Jenkins of Austin Theological Seminary and published by the respected Alban Institute in 2002, is poignantly titled “Great Expectations: Sobering Realities.” Of the study’s sample group, 62 percent of ministers have little spiritual life! Excessive demands on time, conflicts within congregations and between ministers and members, loss of personal spiritual life and loneliness account for a deep malaise within our professional and personal lives.

Each of the following stories is true, although appropriately disguised. Jack, a nationally known minister in a prestigious suburban congregation, told me that although it never actually happened, he could hear in his mind the heavy steps of the personnel committee marching down the hall to his office to tell him it’s time to go. Paranoid? Maybe. But it led to an unhappy, anxious ministry. Then there is Jean, my former student, who came weeping to my front door one evening, unable to take any longer the relentless refusal of the leaders of her small rural congregation to participate in any kind of Christian formation and education. “They want a chaplain, not a minister,” she complained to me. Bob’s ministry is nearly hamstrung over issues between him and a leading family in his congregation concerning war with Iraq, the national flag in the sanctuary and on church grounds, “God Bless America” days (even Mother’s Day!) and the congregation’s right to sing national songs. There is Tony, who can’t cope with the stress of a wife with severe diabetes, three young children and a salary which does not enable him to pay off his \$40,000 college and seminary debt. Finally there is Mary, reduced to quivering anxiety over the local denominational pressure to “go missional,” leading to worship wars in her congregation and terrific conflict with the choir and organist. She feels that the word from denominational authorities





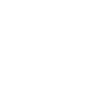
is “grow your congregation or you’re out.” In an area where new paradigm congregations have exploding memberships, Mary feels depressed and anxious. She feels like a failure, with plummeting confidence in the capacity of the faithful exercise of Word and sacraments to deliver the results demanded.

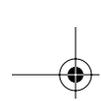
THEOLOGY WARS

Then there is war on the larger front. Theological debates and denominational politics often display levels of intensifying toxicity that mirror the style and tone of national politics. Organized theological caucuses within denominations significantly drain ministerial energies. There is nowhere to hide from the battles over homosexuality and ordination, inclusive language, the Trinity, Christology, missional or justice agendas, contemporary or traditional worship and so on. So-called mainline pastors minister in the midst of doubt that the major denominations will hold together much longer. All sense of a shared history and a common theological and worship identity are breaking down. For many ministers, the trend of declining membership hits home at the congregational level with an accompanying sense of failure.

Ministry is just not much fun anymore. Of course ministry has always been difficult. Weariness is par for the course. Spiritual embattlement is to be expected. We are not in it for the money. The social status of ministers is low and likely to remain so. I am told that on one sociologist’s ranking we are just below a factory foreman. That may not be so bad, but we once held professional status equal to the professions of law and medicine. We are tired, often overworked, usually overstressed and underpaid, theologically confused, often ill-educated for the tasks before us, bored and probably guilty for feeling that way.

Whatever the reasons, national figures show that around one-third of ordained persons leave the ministry after five years, never to return.





It's that bad! The rest of us continue to drag ourselves out of bed in the morning and labor on.

FLAWED EDUCATION

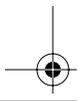
While I recognize the danger of sweeping generalizations, it appears that something has gone very wrong in the education, nurture and employment expectations of ministers. Those of us in theological education go round and round discussing what to do about it. Year after year we hear the stories of pain from our Doctor of Ministry students. Candor insists that we have been and are part of the problem, just as we must be part of the solution.

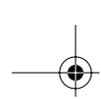
I believe that a broadly liberal theology, especially the dilution of classical Christology and decreased interest in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, have produced a couple of generations of ministers with a theology that fails at the congregational level. The theologians in mainline seminaries have swallowed the bait of accommodation to the dictates of Enlightenment philosophies. The Enlightenment project is now in serious and hopefully terminal decline. As a result, the theological generations who hitched their wagons to its engine are now in disarray.

“Theological reductionism” is a term which means reducing God to fit modern predetermined human categories of experience or rationality. It sometimes known as *foundationalism*. By either name it does not grow congregations or lead to fulfillment in ministry. Read John Hick's book *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralist Age* (Westminster John Knox, 2005), and then ask yourself if this is your hope in ministry and your hope for your congregation.

BUMPER STICKER TRUTH

Now I come to tell you what you already know and prayerfully trust to be true. *Jesus is the answer*. The bumper sticker had it right all along,





although I want to spend the rest of this book exploring exactly what it means for ministry.

I believe there is a theological answer for our malaise and disappointment in ministry. The answer has to do with our understanding of God and how we connect to whatever God is up to. My concern is not with complex academic concepts and arguments but with the real and actual practice of God. If theology is *talk about God*, I will not be content to only talk *about* talk about God. I want to dare *to talk about God*. I will put into words what I think God is up to and what it means for our ministries when we share in the actions of God.

A SUMMARY

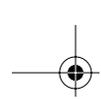
1. The ministry of Jesus is the ministry of God. That is what most of our creedal and confessional language concerning Jesus Christ is about.
2. Jesus' ministry is not merely a past influence that reaches into the present. It is at once historical, present and future.
3. Wherever Christ is, there is the church. By sharing in the life of Jesus, we thereby share in God's continuing ministry. This is the doctrine of our union with Christ, which is the principal work of the Holy Spirit. It is Christ, not we, who does the ministry.

In what follows I will develop the doctrines of the vicarious humanity and ministry of Jesus and show their significance for us as ministers of the gospel. Then I will look at an approach to ministry characterized as *participation in Christ*. When we understand ministry in this ancient way, we will find Jesus' words true, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30).

AN ONGOING CRUCIFIXION

Now a word about the book's title, for it tells much about the journey





we are about to take. The accounts given above of experiences in ministry amount to a kind of ongoing crucifixion. Ministry kills us with regard to our ego needs, desire for power and success and the persistent wish to feel competent and in control.

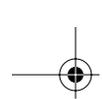
It does not take us long to discover that we cannot heal the sick, raise the dead, calm the demonized, guide the morally afflicted, sober up the alcoholic, make the wife beater loving, calm the anxious, pacify the conflicted, control the intemperate, have answers to all the “Why?” questions, give the teenagers a moral compass and preach magnificent sermons every week, all the while growing the congregation and keeping the members happy. We preach and teach, do the round of pastoral visitations and administer the congregation’s life, while the soreheads more often than not remain sore-headed, the stubborn remain stubborn, the quarrelsome remain quarrelsome and the stupid seem to get no wiser. Meanwhile people continue to get sick and die, argue and get divorced, lose their jobs and get depressed.



ELIJAH’S EXPERIENCE

For many years I have taken Elijah’s story in 1 Kings 19 as a paradigm. Elijah has just pulled off a dramatic and successful confrontation with the prophets of Baal. But as soon as Jezebel finds out about it, Elijah takes off into the wilderness. He succumbs to fear and flight. His ministry is in shambles. He hides in a cave, reminding us of the depressed state of the discouraged minister. God tells him to go out onto the mountain. After the pyrotechnics of wind, earthquake and fire comes “a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). The unexplainable voice of God commands him to do the unthinkable: “Go, return” (1 Kings 19:15). Elijah experienced the crucifixion of ministry. Henceforth for Elijah ministry was possible only on the basis of the Word of God.





TWO SEASONS OF DYING

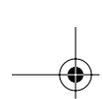
I suspect there are two major crucifixions or seasons of dying in ministry. The first happens early on, as studies now show. After seven years of higher education, great expectations of service in the Lord's vineyard often turn to sad and angry disappointment. About one third of those in early ministry leave, never to return. This is a major death, full of deep disenchantment and at times embittered recriminations. It is a personal, familial, fiscal and ecclesiastical disaster.

The second crucifixion is more subtle and less dramatic. It moves in on us more slowly and insidiously than the rapid, stunning disillusionment of the first crucifixion. It is more profound and in its way more deadly. Once endured and understood, it may usher in a resurrected theological conversion that makes ministry possible for the first time. It is the deep death and the real raising of our ministries. I suspect there are no surveys to consult here, and the timeframe is likely different in each case. There are no Kübler-Ross-like categories, but here is my impression of the typical order of events.

Once the first crucifixion is survived, the minister begins to realize the need for some serious skill learning beyond what the seminary offered. Further education may take the form of a doctor of ministry degree, which offers peer learning, theological retooling and skill enhancing. Some of us travel for a while in the rich pastures of spiritual renewal, all to our spiritual good. We begin to make our way along the career track. Workshops, conferences and seminars are grist to the surviving minister's professional mill. The pastoral tool bag gets filled up with all kinds of ministerial accoutrements, although sadly most ministers in North America are not reading very much these days.

Then somewhere along the way—ten, fifteen, twenty years out, who knows when or what circumstances precipitate the process—a terrible awareness begins to dawn. Now the hurt is deeper than before





because it goes all the way down to the core of our being. It's not only a professional crisis; it is also a shattering crisis of faith. It is a theological crisis.

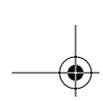
An inadequate theology leads to deep pain. *I can't do this.* I can't convert them. I can't heal them. I can't give them hope or make them happy or pray like Peter or preach like Paul. I can barely understand the theology books anymore, even when I carve out the time and energy to try to read them. My drawer full of pastoral, homiletical and administrative skills is impressive. The weight of experience is a great comfort to me, for I now know how to survive in a parish. But something inside tells me that the whole ministry enterprise is turning to sawdust. Inside I feel I can't bury any more babies, listen to any more divorcing couples, conduct marriages for any more pregnant girls, listen to any more tales of cancer diagnoses, conduct funerals for any more friends or preach the Beatitudes again. I have weathered too many arguments over the color of the church carpets, the brand of cookie for Bible school and bulletin covers for Mother's Day. The yoke is too heavy and the burden is too great to bear. Maybe I also discover that I am just plain bored.

Does God show up any more? If he doesn't, I can no longer carry the load, make the faith exciting or meet the demands for my attention. My knees are buckling under the weight of my obligations. My compassion recoils; it is killing me. And if God does show up, do I have the theological and spiritual apparatus to understand what is happening? If God does show up, what does that mean for what I am supposed to do and say?

A TEST OF COURAGE

It takes great courage for the seasoned minister to admit the second crucifixion. I suspect many of us don't. It may get buried beneath ecclesiastical bonhomie. Outward good cheer masks the inner death of





compassion and the struggle for faithfulness. Keeping busy and running what my friend Eugene Peterson once called “the shop” may usefully occupy our days. We have learned how to fake it. A Doctor of Ministry class once insisted to me that about 90 percent of their time was taken up with congregational administration of one kind or another. I wondered, *What ever happened to the Word and sacraments?*

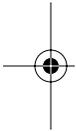
The darkness of Gethsemane is never welcomed. Its nights are too long and fretful, its prayers are too hard, its waiting is too lonely and its tears are too stained with metaphorical blood to be welcome. We stare into the spiritual void, into the theological abyss; we discover the terror of our personal *tohu wabohu* (the “formless void” of Genesis 1:2) and vaguely hope that the Spirit of God hovers over us as he did at the creation.

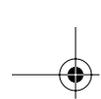
NOT MY MINISTRY

It takes great spiritual, theological and professional courage to look this second crucifixion in the eye and name it for what it is. This is the death of *my* ministry. From now on faithful ministry—God-glorifying, Spirit-empowered, world-transforming and kingdom-announcing ministry—will be possible only on some other basis.

The new basis is not something the seminary or the purveyors of ministry skills ever told us about. Our new basis for ministry is a sharing in the continuing ministry of Jesus, for the church and her ministry can be found only where Jesus has already showed up. He has to carry the load and do the job of saving people, for I am no longer capable or available. I have discovered a terrible limiting truth about myself. I am not the Messiah. I don’t do salvation any more. I am being crucified; I am gone from the center of the picture.

The ministry of Jesus the Lord is displacing me from the throne of “my” ministry. In truth it was never mine. We refer to *our* ministries as if we own them and as if they are all about us. We deeply invest in





our own success, although we wrap it up in pious language to soften its prideful aspect. We wish for professional preferment and fulfillment. We enjoy the applause and warm affirmations when they come. We are human, after all. We are made with boundaries we can't transcend.

WHEN GOD KILLS A MINISTRY

It is a mistake to leave the impression that our ministries are crucified only by the backbreaking burdens of responsibilities and obligations. Remember, the Word of God is combative; it is "sharper than any two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). *Yahweh Sabaoth* is Lord of Hosts, commander of the heavenly army. God will not be timid about getting us out of the way.

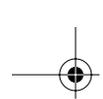
Instead of *Where Christ is, there is the church*, we may have begun to think, *Where my ministry is, there is Christ and the church*. That idea is blasphemy, for we make ourselves Lord. In that case it is necessary for God himself to kill our ministry.

If we are not very successful in ministry, in whatever way we measure success, then God does not have a hard time getting us out of the way. It may even be a great relief when God brings us to the ministerial Jordan and says, *Cross and let me do it for you; stay here on this side, keep trying to do it yourself, and it's an early and resentful retirement*. The burdens of office may have become so heavy that we welcome being bumped aside by Jesus.

If, however, we aspire to ministerial royalty, then the crucifixion by God will have to be much more brutal. Some of us are upwardly mobile ministers. We have moved seamlessly from associate positions in prosperous congregations, under the guiding mentorship of able pastors, to solo pastorates and then to head-of-staff positions in large congregations where we can mentor others.

Those of us who are "successful" ministers should be warned that





our mortification will be especially painful. We might be a long time dying. Our embedded pride and the myth of competence may lie very deep. Too easily we fell into the business of purveying religious merchandise to choosy consumers with measurable productivity and identifiable success.

NOT I BUT CHRIST

Whether we are “successful” or “unsuccessful” or somewhere in the middle, we get in the way. Whether we minister with mediocre skill or with truckloads of competence, whether with small success or with much public acclamation, God brings us to the point where our reliance on what we can do is killed by God.

The second crucifixion enables us to see the glorious freedom of ministry expressed by Paul: *Not I but Christ*. “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Everything is now to be rebuilt on this foundation. Jesus Christ stands in for us. As in faith and worship, so now also in ministry, he does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

This is what I mean by the vicarious humanity and ministry of Jesus Christ. We are bumped aside by God with whatever forcefulness is required, so that Jesus stands in our place. He offers the worship, discipleship, faith and ministry that we thought we could offer but can't. The crucifixion of our ministry is staggering good news. Now ministry is now possible for us, probably for the first time, as gospel.

