

Thinking of Ministry?

By Rev. Dirk Poppe

Introduction

Have you ever thought about becoming a minister? It is a stunning task. Preaching the gospel is an incredible task. You get to open the word and lead people to know their God, love him and walk closely with him. Very beautiful. You also get to teach the youth. It's delightful to spend time with young people and to teach them. It's especially beautiful to talk to them about the things that matter: about who God is and how to walk in a relationship with him. It is also a special privilege to be able to teach those who are just coming to know the LORD for the first time. And being a pastor to Christ's people is also extremely special. You get to have trusting relationships with your people, open the Word and pray with them as they celebrate joyful events and have to process very difficult things. You get to love, help, befriend, support, encourage, challenge and admonish your family of God.

At the same time, thinking about being a preacher of the gospel can also be bit daunting. Most people look up to ministers. Ask them for advice. Listen to what they have to say. That can be intimidating. It also seems hard to become a minister. Seems like you have to be pretty smart. Years of study. Lots of reading. Learning Greek and Hebrew. It's easy to get discouraged and think it's not for you. So how are you supposed to make sense of whether or not the ministry is for you?

God raises up ministers

In the first place we should realise that it is the Lord's joy to raise up preachers of the gospel. The LORD is a good God who desires to live in relationship with his people. As Almighty God he could have revealed himself in any way he wanted. But he has decided to reveal himself through the preaching of his Word. In Romans 1 the apostle Paul says, "So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." It is by means of the preaching of the gospel that God saves his people and brings us close to him. Which raises the question: where do preachers come from? The Holy Spirit answers this question in Romans 10:14-15, "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" The only way that people can believe in God is if they hear the preaching. And the only way that people preach is if they are sent. God has assigned preachers the beautiful task of declaring the good news of salvation so that God's people can come to know him and live in intimate relationship with their heavenly Father. What this means is that if you end up becoming a preacher, this is not just your initiative. It is the LORD who raises people up for this task. He calls. He equips. He enables. He blesses. And so he gets all glory.

Are you called?

So how do you know if you are called? This is one of the questions that young men ask the most often. And what is that call supposed to look like? Great question. But it's kind of tricky. It is true that we read in the Bible of God calling Moses, Jeremiah and the twelve apostles. God directly reached out to these men and told them that he had a task for them. Is that what we can expect? Does God speak to us in some way to let us know that we should pursue ministry? Not anymore. Don't expect God to appear to you and let you know that he wants you to pursue ministry. But that's not to say that he doesn't lead you. One of the great things God does is that he gives a man an aspiration for ministry. Just before

telling Timothy the qualifications for being an elder, Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:1, “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.” Some men aspire to being an elder or minister. As long as this doesn’t come from pride, this is a beautiful aspiration. To have the desire to serve the LORD and his people is a beautiful task. The LORD often works that into the heart of a man before he even considers ministry.

The LORD also often works providentially to lead a man into the ministry. While some men desire to become preachers after listening to their own minister preach, many of the ministers I know have become ministers through the encouragement of others. Many have had a parent, friend, teacher or minister ask: “Have you ever thought about becoming a minister? You should pray about it. I think you would be good at it.” If someone ever says that to you, then you have a job. You need to pray. You need to ask your Lord to make it clear to you if you should serve him as a preacher.

But simply aspiring to ministry doesn’t mean that you are called. Not everyone who aspires to ministry becomes a minister. First you need to complete your training. It starts with a Bachelor’s degree at university. Part of that will be learning Greek and Hebrew. It’s also helpful to take some Latin, logic, maybe some ancient history. But at the same time there is flexibility. I know ministers who have a bachelor’s degree in Science, Business, Accounting or History. I often encourage young men to fill out their bachelor’s degree with what they love. After that, you need to do a Master’s of Divinity degree at the Canadian Reformed Theological Seminary. Going to seminary is a real treasure. There is a beautiful spirit there. You are taught by godly men who know the LORD and his Word well. Besides teaching you, they will also mentor you in your walk of faith. And you are surrounded with many other godly young men who are interested in pursuing the ministry of the gospel. It’s an incredible learning environment. It’s a four year degree. Lots of seminar classes, where you present your work and evaluate the work of your peers. They also invite lecturers in who have expertise in pastoral care, teaching and public speaking to help you grow in these parts of the task. Part of the program is also a Pastoral Training Program. It’s a chance go get some experience in catechism teaching, mission work or church planting, and walking alongside of an experienced minister for three months where you get to do everything that a minister usually does. Very encouraging to get some experience while at the same time have a mentor to assist you.

But simply graduating from seminary doesn’t make you a minister. After you have graduated, you need to present yourself to classis and pass the classical examination to become eligible for call. It’s only after you are eligible for call that you can receive a call from a vacant congregation. And then you need to pass one more classical examination in the area of the church who called you. It’s only then that you can become a minister of the gospel.

So how do you know if you are called? You are only actually called to be a preacher of the gospel when a church calls you. Up to that point, you can aspire to ministry. But there are a bunch of steps you need to take first. Which is actually really beautiful. It means that when you are 18 you don’t have to decide to become a minister. When your minister or friend encourages you to become a minister, then you don’t need to have a crisis of conscience because you don’t feel called. Pray about it. Talk to other wise people in your life about it. If the LORD does lay it on your heart that this might be for you, then start to take the steps to get ready for it. Go to Uni. Take a Greek or Hebrew course. See how it goes. It may be that you figure out really fast that this isn’t for you. Or it may be that it’s not as hard as you thought and you can get it done. Over time the LORD will either open or close the door for you. In the end, if he desires for you to be a preacher of the gospel, he will lead your life in that direction. But actually there is something more important than any of this. The most important thing you need in order to become a minister of the gospel is a personal relationship with God. You need to know God and love him. You need to walk in faith before him. You need to open your heart to him and live in humble dependence before him. This is not something which you can do by your own strength. It is a

gift of God's Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the one who draws us into relationship with him. He does that through his Word and Spirit. So spend time in the Word. Read it. Study it. Memorise it. Listen to large chunks of it. And grow in prayer. Make time in your day to approach God in prayer. And then open your heart to him. Ask him to love you, to reveal himself to you. Ask him to live in you and to conform you to his image. When God teaches us about the qualifications for an elder in 1 Timothy 3, then what stands out is that we need to be godly. It's all about a godly character. Pray that God would lead you to know him, love him and walk closely with him. This stands at the heart of effective ministry.

You know, if you read all this then it might sound like the ministry is for smart people. It's true that you need to be able to read. You are going to be doing a lot of reading if you are minister. You also need to get through Uni and seminary. But don't be too daunted by the task. I know a bunch of ministers who had other jobs before going into the ministry: a farmer, builder, accountant, mechanic, radio technician and teacher. If it's in your heart, then the important thing is to pray about it and take the first steps. Let God open or close the doors as he sees fit.

Expectations

One of the other challenges that you may face when thinking about going into the ministry is the expectation of others. If you let someone know that you are thinking about becoming a mechanic, electrician, accountant or teacher, then lots of people will say, "That's great! You are really suited for that." But if you tell them that you are thinking about becoming a preacher, then people might say, "Wow! That's quite something. I will pray for you." It seems that people start treating you differently when you think about becoming a minister. It's a bit tricky to navigate. On the one hand, people have a high regard for ministers since they are set aside by God to preach his word. On the other hand, high expectations can be overwhelming.

So how do you think about this? It's beautiful that God's people have great respect for the LORD and those whom he has sent to preach the gospel. We can be very grateful for that. At the same time, I would encourage you not to pay too much attention to people's expectations. What's most important is your walk with the LORD. Love your Lord and seek to please him. Live with an open heart before him. If you love God and walk closely with him then at core things will be right in your life. Then you don't have to worry too much about what other people think. If the LORD opens the door for you to become a minister, then over time this is an issue that fades into the background. You grow into the task and the LORD equips you to fill that role. It's also important in this regard that you have integrity. It's important to be the same person on the pulpit and in your study as you are around the dinner table, playing sports or sitting around a campfire. When we have integrity, and people get to know us for who we are, then people don't have unrealistic expectations of us but they love us for who we are. Unrealistic expectations fade into the background.

What's it like living in Canada?

Over the years we have invited dozens of young men to our home to speak with them about the prospect of becoming a minister. One of the questions they invariably ask is: what's it like living in Canada? And what they really want to know is: "How do you deal with the cold. It gets like -20 degrees Celsius! How can you survive in that kind of temperature?" It's true. It gets freezing cold for a few months of the year. But it's awesome. Going for a walk after there is a fresh layer of snow over everything is one of the most magical moments of life. God tidies everything up. Sparking white. A crisp blue sky. And bright sunshine. Nothing quite like it. And besides, unlike the houses in Australia, ahem, the homes there are built to withstand the cold. You set the temperature at 20 degrees and you live quite comfortably inside your house in the depths of winter.

If you are really worried about it, then take my approach. Before we moved to Perth, I learned that it can get over forty degrees Celsius for days at a time. I wondered: how can people survive that kind of heat? That's impossible. But then I consoled myself with the fact that there are millions of people living in Perth of their own volition. They seem to be able to survive. So it can't be that bad.

Moving to Canada will be an adventure. Embrace it. One of the great gifts of ministry is that you get to move to different places and meet God's people living there. Reformed people around the world have great unity because we all share the same faith in Christ. And yet, due to our historical circumstances and unique insights, we can learn a great deal from each other. It is a great gift of our Father to live alongside his people in different places to love and learn from each other. It is painful to move. But it also leads to beautiful relationships and incredible growth.

A Great Need

One last thing. Our Lord Jesus told us in John 4:35 that the fields are white for harvest. There is a crying need for ministers. This hasn't changed. Between the CanRC and the FRCA and FRCSA we have historically had about a 20 percent vacancy rate. That's where it's at right now too. We could use an extra 20 ministers tomorrow to fill our vacancies. Also in the next twenty years, about 50 ministers will retire. On top of that, we also add about one new church or mission post per year. That means in twenty years, we will need 90 ministers to fill 20 vacancies, 50 retirements and 20 new churches. Will you please consider the ministry of the gospel? Will you join in praying that God would raise up faithful men who will preach the good news that many may come to salvation?