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Ministry

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At theological college I was taught that the best model for ministry today was the bricoleur. The term has the probable advantage that few people have any idea what it means. We were duly informed that a bricoleur is a high class French handyman. The minister, in the same vein, must have a variety of tools in his kit bag and apply these to the various tasks which come his way. As a way of describing the actual tasks of the clergy it is not without merit. However, it was presented in contrast to and, indeed, as a better model than, the traditional idea of the minister as a pastor.

Today many adverts for larger churches, especially 'evangelical' churches, stress that churches are looking for a good team leader or manager. Recently I also encountered a situation where a rural team was being proposed but it was decided to wait until there is a change of clergyman in one parish so that someone with particular administrative skills can be appointed to spearhead the multi-church parish.

It is arguable that management ability is a biblical requirement for ministry. In some translations of 1 Timothy 3.4 the minister is to be someone who can 'manage' their household well. However, the word has a much richer meaning than would be suggested by the word we often use 'manage'. It can be translated 'ruler' and indeed has a secondary meaning of 'care for'. When Paul moves on from the family to the Church he uses a different word which does mean 'care for'. Indeed the only other occurrence of the word in the New Testament is in relation to the care shown by the Good Samaritan. Therefore, the notion of the pastor, the shepherd who leads, directs and tends for the sheep is a far better way of understanding 1 Tim 3.4 than of a manager of the church.

If one of the key models for ministry is the pastor, what is the prime role and duty of the pastor? I have elsewhere in this issue drawn attention to John Chrysostom's treatise 'On the Priesthood'. In that work Chrysostom stresses that the prime duty of the priest is to teach the Word. He lists the many passages in the New Testament which show that it is the ministry of the Word that is the work of the minister. He then goes even further by pointing out how much stress was put on the Word ministry in the age of miracles. Now, he says, that miracles have largely passed we must give even more attention to the Word. A large part of books 4, 5 and 6 of his treatise are taken up with the need for the priest to be an able teacher and to make the ministry of the Word their priority, including the necessity of proper preparation. Though this is the particular duty of the priest Chrysostom also demonstrates from scripture that it is also the duty of all believers to spread the Word and to exhort one another.

Perhaps John Chrysostom is not the best model for us. Few in the history of the Church could be said to have excelled him as a preacher and his homilies remain a testimony to God's grace in him. However, even if we should think him far greater than we could possibly be, he was far from convinced of his own worthiness or ability to handle the oracles of God.

When the a church sees administration or management as the chief function of the presbyteral ministry (priesthood) then there is something seriously wrong and much to be concerned about. I have no doubt that in the church today the minister must act in many ways like a handyman. This does not make it desirable, still less a model to be extolled. If the minister must have many tools in his bag then there is one which must be used more than all the others, which must show the marks of his labour – that is the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God.