

Those Classified Ads

It is always a traumatic experience for a preacher when the congregation “suggests” that he should seek another setting for his work. Well, they fire him! Rather euphemistically nowadays we might say the Spirit is directing him to another field of labor. But since the Spirit is secretive about the field, the preacher must search to find it.

Back in my ancient times, we depended mainly upon the grapevine to learn of congregations that had dispatched their minister where we might apply. If a group was desperate enough to run an ad in the *Firm Foundation*, only a desperate preacher would check it out. Now there are want-ads in the journals, bulletins, and web sites. As I scan those classified ads today in a candid manner, my reactions run from appreciation through amusement, amazement, and concern. Let's review a sort of composite of them.

Paul wrote, “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, etc.” (Eph. 4:11-12). That did not offer many capacities for work in those times, and some of those have been deleted! ☺

Here is a much wider list collected from the Classified Ads: preacher, gospel preacher, minister, co-minister, pulpit minister, associate minister, involvement minister, associate involvement minister, discipleship minister, evangelist, evangelist / preacher, missionary, evangelist/missionary, youth minister, pulpit/youth minister, associate youth minister, youth/family minister, youth minister/song leader, children's ministry director, education minister, church builder. No call for secretaries or janitors, however. Nor for pastors/shepherds/elders.

We applaud the intention of evangelizing and pastoral teaching in each of these modern, narrowly defined capacities. They are specialized methods and means of doing the work Paul speaks of more generally in the church at large. Discovery of aptitudes and sharpening of skills for efficiency are wise and practical.

Of concern, however, is the fact that most of our people do not know the difference between a preacher and a teacher or between a teacher and a pastor or between a minister and an evangelist. In scriptural context, the gospel was preached – heralded, proclaimed, evangelized – while the general doctrines were imparted by teaching, instruction, reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. The gospel message was conveyed through evangelists (preachers) but prophets, pastors, and teachers edified through teaching.

Any person who serves in an appointed capacity in a church is a minister. The Greek term *diakonos* which is Anglicized into *deacon* is also the word translated into *servant* and *minister*. They have the same meaning. All disciples are deacons-ministers-servants of God, but only those appointed or hired by a church serve in that capacity in the congregation.

There is no scriptural command or precedent for preaching to an assembly of disciples. They have already become evangelized, obedient believers who subsequently need the guidance of the apostolic teachings and pastoral care. The difference is like that of a recruiting officer and a drill sergeant. Once recruited, they need no recruiting again, but they need the teaching and training of the sergeant. The assembly is the place for teaching and training rather than recruitment. The primary purpose of assemblies is edification of disciples rather than evangelism or corporate worship, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 14.

By a slow evolutionary process we have been developing a distinctive *clergy* system. Carl Ketcherside, in an article *The Clergy System*, wrote, “Perhaps, there is nothing seriously wrong with the mere words *clergy and laity*. It is the creating of a distinction between them which is so fraught with danger. The fact is that all of God's clergy are laity, and all of God's laity are clergy. Every child of God is a priest. Every child of God is a minister. Every disciple of Jesus has entered the ministry. The word of God knows nothing of a disciple who is not a minister. So long as we pay empty lip-service to this concept while practicing something which is exactly the opposite, we are hypocritical and acting out of sham.”

The importation of specialized professionals speaks loudly that the community of believers is not self-sustaining, that disciples cannot communicate effectively with their peers, and that highly skilled personnel are needed. Commonly, the congregation in existence for a generation or two or three still depends upon hired servants recruited as surrogate elders.

With all good intentions, we have transformed the local body, a priesthood of all believers, into a system of organized religion through which each is obliged to render his or her service to God. Then individual initiative and aptitudes are stifled by the expectation of professionals doing the work one is qualified to do. One may easily relax into being a spectator or a small cog in the machinery of the organized system. Most of the effort, personnel, and finances go to operate the system. It may be compared to a 150-pound person driving a two-ton automobile; most of the power is spent in moving the car rather than the individual.

There is a growing realization among us that God endows us for private ministries. Whatever a person can do best and enjoy doing most is a gift that can be utilized as a person's life-ministry apart from dependence upon direction, approval, or cooperation of anyone else. Paul's tent-making evangelism gave him greatest satisfaction and freedom (1 Cor. 9). Was it unwise for the great apostle to use his precious

time making tents when he should have been "serving the Lord?" I can appreciate persons who want to serve "full-time," but are we not all serving "full-time?"

This house in which I live is in a neighborhood with beautiful professional landscaping and yard care. While there may be some recognition of the skills of the keepers, they do not receive credit for the beauty of the neighborhood. They just do what they are paid to do as a profession. The homeowners who hire them are due more credit than they are. Can you not relate this to our subject?

The youngest acceptable age that I saw in the ads was 24 years and the oldest was 50. There is little demand for men past 50 years of age, though some who were engaged to work while younger are used as they grow past that age, and some churches accept older men because of scarcity of younger ones. And some are cheaper. So there is a career span of about 25 years.

Many churches require academic training of a college degree, advanced degree, bachelor in Bible, and/or computer skills, with from three to five years experience. If we are to continue to depend upon the pulpit, I am certainly in favor of seeing intelligent life there. I am not convinced, however, that those of highest academic training communicate best with the masses we hope to reach. Without intention we may proclaim an unspoken message that the scriptures relating to a life of discipleship are so complicated that only the men from the ivory towers can explain them. The message comes across that men, women, and youth of the congregation lack capability to reach, teach, lead, and buildup their peers, but a sort of professional priestly class is needed.

Our Stone-Campbell Movement swept the nation in the 1800's depending mostly upon tent-making evangelists and ministers. I once read (but lost the reference) one brother's claim that, when he moved to Dallas about the turn of the century, there was no other "full-time preacher" between Memphis and Dallas. In my limited experience, I never knew of a church having an office and secretary until the 1940's.

As for the experience of the applicant, how will he gain experience if he must have it before being accepted?

Some ads mention need of positive spiritual qualities, zeal, and initiative. Marriage to a supportive wife, and even children, are called for. Some require excellent speaking ability, good communication skills, willingness to work under oversight of elders, and willingness to minister to the church. A four-talent man is sought by one congregation to do preaching, teaching, visiting, and some administrative duties.

In most congregations are there not men and women who have these individual skills, interests, and aptitudes plus a willingness to exercise them at no charge? Why should we demand that all these aptitudes be in one imported person when they exist already in the body ready to be tapped at no financial expenditure?

The term *hire* is used unashamedly. One group will hire for 20 hours per week but others specify full-time expectations. *Hire and fire!* -- such crass, atrocious terms! Do we hire men to perform spiritual service? If they can be hired with production specifications like those of carpenters or salesmen, then they can be fired for lack of achievement. The congregation becomes like a business dealing in a spiritual commodity.

Paul instructed, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" (1 Tim. 5:17-19; see Gal. 6:6). This is the only precedent for financial support of a person ministering within the congregation except possibly for that of widows (5:9f). As for evangelists, however, Paul opens this avenue of support (1 Cor. 9).

Here is an elder who is devoting himself so fully to preaching to the lost and teaching the church that his occupational job suffers; so the church supports him financially that he may expand his efforts. Doesn't the church *hire* him, you may ask. No, he is not preaching and teaching as a professional occupation in order to make a living. He is doing those things out of zealous concern and then becomes enabled more fully by support of others. That is a difference between a servant and a hireling.

Most of the ads reveal the size of the church and some state positive purposes and goals for the group like being purpose driven, reaching the community, and increase of the numbers. One describes itself as a conservative congregation and another as being very doctrinal and studying from the King James Version. None mention desire for re-study of traditional beliefs and practices or outreach toward other groups for unity.

And some red flags are prominent by demand that the applicant be "scripturally sound," "doctrinally sound," "sound in the word," "firmly rooted in the word," or "well versed in the scriptures." I will let you choose your own adjective to apply to that! Can't you just imagine some preacher who is eager to relocate reading such advertisements and saying to himself, "No use for me to apply, for I am not doctrinally sound, etc."?

What is being communicated by those expressions? They are red flags saying, "We want a man who will reinforce our traditional teachings and practices (for whichever splinter group it is) without challenging anything that would rock the boat. Doctrinal soundness is agreement with us. Let the applicant take note."

Am I just being picky like the grouchy old man I am? Or do these advertisements reveal a misdirection into a fully developed concept of modern organized religion? When teaching that each person

is a working part of the **body**, we tend to interpret **body** to mean **congregation**. While it is true that one may rightly serve in capacities in a congregation, our primary responsibility for use of gifts is in daily life, in personal relationships, and in private ministry. Organizations do not have religion. That's an individual matter.

In his parable of the judgment Jesus did **not** say, "Truly, I say to you, as your **congregation** did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:31-46). The *Good Samaritan* used his time, money, and energy to show compassion rather than referring the victim to an organized program. A floating bulletin clipping lists "*Two Dozen Things You Can Do For The Church*." Most suggested activities involve serving individuals, like "Take a remembrance to a shut-in." A loving gesture, but for whom? For the shut-in or a system of religion? Serving individuals or an organization? Are we an organization serving or individuals ministering? A lectureship is announced with "Serving The Church" as its theme. It is granted that there are needs too big for an individual to fill without cooperation with others, but we are warning of an unhealthy trend.

Though I feel strongly that reform is in order, I am not indicating that correctness in the operational activities of the local body is essential to salvation. Many methods for expediting God's will in a group are left to human wisdom as to what is the most effective and appropriate. Methods are matters of expediency. No man or group of them have unerring wisdom.

The more we deviate from principles set forth in the scriptures, however, the less effective and more problematical we can expect our activities to become. []