

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF GOD'S MINISTRY?

by Jamie McNab

Most of us with a Church of God background are quite used to having a ministry "over us". We are very familiar with the concept of local elders, preaching elders, pastors, evangelists (and in our days, also one apostle).

Those of us who came from any sort of religious background would no doubt be familiar with ministers or priests from our earlier church affiliations. Even those with little prior religious contact would take it for granted that "churches have ministers".

In these latter days at the end of the end-time, however, the place *and purpose* of "the ministry" is under fire. Some are asking, "WHY DO WE NEED ministers?" Some say we have now grown past the point where ministers are necessary -- that we are now spiritually mature "and have need of nothing". Ministers, some tell us, are part of an *evil hierarchy*, foisted by Satan on the church, and from which we have now been set free.

What is the TRUTH?

The Recent History of the Church of God

Probably a large number of us can remember our days in the Worldwide Church of God when Mr Armstrong was alive.

The Church was a comparatively large organisation (at least by comparison to what we see today in the Churches of God!). Church attendance was well over 100,000, and the Church was represented in scores of countries worldwide. *The World Tomorrow* broadcast aired on 400 TV stations a week. Over 8,000,000 *Plain Truth* magazines were sent out a month. Tithes and offerings were in excess of \$200 million a year.

It is no surprise that such a large broadcasting and publishing operation developed an administrative structure similar at times to a business corporation. On a purely physical level, the Work was operated as a corporation -- with premises, accounting, payroll,

pensions, auditing, staffing, cash-flow, budgeting, computer departments, and scores of other "business departments".

We always understood, however, that although the Church operated at one level as a physical organisation or corporation, it was in reality a *spiritual organism* -- the very Body of Jesus Christ.

We accepted Mr Armstrong as God's end-time apostle, who could make "binding and loosing" decisions, albeit only in line with Scripture. "Under" Mr Armstrong, we acknowledged a number of evangelists, then pastor-rank ministers, and so on "down" to our local ministers.

We were used to a formal, and very structured, church administration.

Probably few of us had any particular objections at the time to "the ministry", *as such*. Where specific problems existed, we probably accepted that it was just the carnal nature of the individuals concerned which was at fault -- or perhaps some personality clash -- or some misunderstanding, that hopefully time and patience would heal.

Since Mr Armstrong died, however, there have been *major changes* -- as we are all too painfully aware.

Over several years, Mr Armstrong's successors gradually did away with God's *revealed truth* -- and old-lies, masquerading as "new truth", were presented to God's people. We now understand the WCG to be the "synagogue of Satan".

The Church of God has been scattered. We now have many "churches of God" -- the PCG, several varieties of United, the Global (now largely deceased), the Living COG, Restored COG, Church of the Great God, Church of God's Faithful, etc., etc. -- the Journal newspaper recently alluded to some 237 separate churches of God!

Ministers Tested

Many members have come to realise that, too often, deception was preached to them from the pulpit. Many of our former ministers remain in the WCG, teaching the Trinity, Sunday-worship, and other Protestant doctrines. Cynically, we might wonder to what extent these men may have compromised with God's Word to protect their salaries. Perhaps we have concluded that there was a degree of hypocrisy at times from those who were "over us".

Among the organisations that have come out of the WCG, there have been some very unseemly episodes -- and those "in high office" have on occasions given every appearance of bringing the name of God's Church into disrepute. We have seen some very public battles between fellow ministers and evangelists as, for example, United and Global and Living have fought and, at times, almost slandered each other over the past couple of years. Divisions in these organisations have split up brethren who have previously fellowshiped together for decades. Some have been so affected by the carnal bickering and arguing among their leaders that they have simply given up on religion, and quietly slipped back into the world.

To many people, much of the blame rests *with the ministry*. The shepherds have not fed or protected the flock.

God's Word warns of problems in the ministry. Prophecies such as Ezek 34:2 come to mind, "Son of man, prophesy AGAINST THE SHEPHERDS of Israel, prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: *Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves!* Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?"

Or we read in Jer 23:1-2, "*Woe to the shepherds who destroy and SCATTER the sheep of My pasture!* says the Lord ... You have *scattered My flock*, DRIVEN them away, and have not attended to them. Behold I will attend to you for *the evil* of your doings..."

In looking at the situation we are now in, some have concluded that the ministry, as a whole, *is not necessary*. Their view is that we can *all be teachers* -- we can "go it on our own" -- we do not need anyone *over us*. Some, who have suffered abuse from a minister somewhere in the past, feel that "no so-called minister is going to tell ME what to do again". They see any minister as representing a purely carnal form of hierarchy, and as such, to be rejected.

But before we decide to "throw the baby out with the bathwater", let us review what the Bible has to say about the ministry -- and its real purpose. Let's make sure we know WHY God gave us a ministry, and what the ministers' responsibilities *are* -- as well as what their responsibilities *are not!*

Take Care of the Church

In 1 Tim 3:1-5 we read, "This is a faithful saying: if a man desires the position of a bishop (or *overseer*), he desires a good work. A bishop

then MUST BE blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded ... one who rules his own house well ... for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he TAKE CARE of the Church of God".

The term "bishop" has a very religious connotation to us today, perhaps making us think of some purple-robed senior priest in the Roman Catholic church. The Greek term, however, simply means an *overseer* -- that is, one who "sees over" or "watches over".

But note that this individual clearly does have a RESPONSIBILITY. God requires him to be an individual of character and integrity, because *he is responsible* for taking care of the local Church. And there clearly are *specific individuals* who have this responsibility -- and who must be QUALIFIED.

He is *not* there to RULE over, or dictate to, the brethren. It does mention that he is to *rule* his family well, but "rule" here is from the Greek *proistemi* which means: be set over, preside, superintend, care for. The RSV translates as "he must *manage* his own household well". A good husband and father does not domineer and dictate to his family -- but he is responsible to look after them, and TAKE CARE OF THEIR NEEDS. Likewise with a bishop, overseer, elder or minister! He must take care of the needs of the flock of God. Note the condemnation we read earlier in Jer 23:2 of the shepherds who have "driven them away, and NOT ATTENDED to them" -- not attended to the needs of God's people -- not *taken care* of them.

Shepherd and Protect the Church

In Acts 20:17, 18, 28-30 we read, "From Miletus (Paul) sent from Ephesus and called for the ELDERS of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them ...Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you OVERSEERS, to *shepherd the church* of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves".

We see here again that there are certain, specific individuals who are appointed as *overseers* -- who are to take heed to the flock. Paul warns that some will rise up speaking "perverse things to draw away

disciples" -- the clear implication is that these elders should take heed to *speaking only true things*, keeping the flock on the true path.

We are told that their God-given Holy Spirit-ordained purpose is to "*shepherd the church of God*". The KJV says to *feed* the church of God. The Greek here is *poimaino* which Zodhiates, in his book, *The Complete Word Study of the New Testament*, gives as: "to shepherd, tend ... it implies the whole office of a shepherd, guiding, guarding, folding of the flock as well as *leading it to nourishment*".

Note how Paul says that the overseers -- elders -- should feed and nourish the flock AND take heed of the danger from savage wolves who would seek to destroy the flock by introducing perverse -- deceptive and corrupt -- teachings. The elders were to protect the flock by ensuring that THE TRUTH was preserved and taught.

Be Examples

These points are re-emphasised in 1 Pet 5:1-4, "The ELDERS who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD which is among you, serving as *overseers*, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as *being lords over those entrusted to you*, but BEING EXAMPLES to the flock ..."

Again we see the elders described as *overseers* -- those who "see over" or "watch over" the flock which has been *entrusted to them*. They are to *shepherd* the flock of God -- not to dominate and "LORD IT" over the brethren -- but to tend and care for them. Not to give orders and demand unquestioning obedience -- but to set a *right example*, that others can imitate. And to do it voluntarily, happily, as a *service* -- not for any financial rewards or carnal gain (*filthy lucre* in KJV!)

The Amplified translates this verse as, "I warn and counsel the elders among you (the pastors and spiritual guides of the church) ... tend (*nurture*, guard, guide and fold) the flock of God that is [your responsibility], not by coercion or constraint, but willingly; not dishonourably motivated by the advantages and profits [belonging to the office], but eagerly and cheerfully; *not domineering* [as arrogant, dictatorial, and overbearing persons] over those in your charge, but being examples (patterns and models of Christian living) to the flock ...".

Labouring in the Word

The scriptures continue to show precisely HOW the elders are to *tend* and *care for* the flock that has been entrusted to them.

1 Tim 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those *who labour* in THE WORD and DOCTRINE".

As shown previously, the word "rule" here is *proistemi* which means "set over, superintend, preside, care for". This is not describing someone who dogmatically orders people around to carry out his bidding!

But note the reference here to *labouring* -- working at -- the preaching of God's word.

The Amplified version gives, "Let the elders who perform the duties of their office well be considered doubly worthy of honour [and adequate financial support], especially those who labour *faithfully* in PREACHING AND TEACHING".

In 2 Tim 1:13 and 2:2 Paul continues, "*Hold fast* the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus ... and the things which *you have heard from me* among many witnesses, commit these to *faithful men* who will be able to TEACH OTHERS also". The NIV translates this latter phrase as "entrust to *reliable men* who will also be qualified to teach others".

A major part of the service rendered to God's people is the work of *preaching and teaching* THE WORD -- helping us be better prepared to fulfil God's purpose for us. Paul instructed Timothy to "*Preach the Word!* Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine ..." 2 Tim 4:2.

In these days when there is great confusion and deception in our midst, we need elders who are *faithful men*, and who can teach and preach sound doctrine.

Titus 1:5-7,9 states, "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and *appoint elders* in every city as I commanded you -- if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or

insubordination. For a bishop (*overseer*) must be blameless, as a steward of God ... *holding fast the faithful word* as he has been taught, that he may be able, by SOUND DOCTRINE, both to exhort and convict those who contradict".

The NIV translates the latter part of this passage as, "Since an *overseer* is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless ...he must *hold firmly* to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can *encourage others* by SOUND DOCTRINE and refute those who oppose it".

Ministry to be Appreciated

The scriptures say nothing about *resisting* and rejecting the true ministers of God -- instead we are to acknowledge and appreciate the service they render to us. 1 Thess 5:12 tells us, "And we *urge you*, brethren, to recognise those who LABOUR AMONG YOU, and are over you in the Lord and *admonish you*, and to *esteem them very highly* in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves".

These men are said to be "over us" in the Lord. This once again is the Greek word *proistemi*, meaning "to be set over, preside, superintend, care for".

To "admonish" is: to *put into the mind*, to INSTRUCT, to warn. The Amplified has "...who warn and kindly reprove and exhort you".

And note, that while the elders have a responsibility *to labour* and *instruct*, the BRETHREN have a *responsibility* to "hold them in very high and most affectionate esteem in appreciation of their work", verse 13, Amplified.

One of the *key scriptures* regarding our relationship to the ministry is Heb 13:17 which reads, "Obey those who rule over you, and BE SUBMISSIVE, for they *watch out* for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you".

Some ministers have sought to use this scripture as a club over the head of the brethren -- "Look, I am a minister *over you*, and you must OBEY and submit to me -- now, do as you're told"! Any resistance is likely to be shouted down as "rebellion against God's government"!

Mr Don Roth has explained this scripture in a number of sermons. The translations we see in the KJV and NKJV -- about *obey* and *rule over* -- owe much to the prejudices of the translators of 1611. These were men who had grown up with the most powerful of all hierarchical systems, the Roman Catholic church. They had a vested interest in translating the Bible in a manner pleasing to King James, who very much wanted divine authority to rule over and be obeyed!

The instruction is not so much to "obey", as to *be persuaded by* (see Zodhiates). And what would it take to persuade us? Words and actions!

"Those who rule over you" is better translated as "those *who show you the way*". The instruction to us here is to *examine* those who go before us -- who show us the way -- checking them out in terms of their words AND their behaviour and conduct. And IF they demonstrate that they are truly honouring their God-given role, we are told to BE SUBMISSIVE -- not to fuss and argue and fight, but to co-operate voluntarily -- to yield -- to assist, for the *sake of unity*, and so that we can actually achieve and *accomplish*. This is not just blindly "following the leader"!

And note that these men who "go before" are said to watch over the flock -- that is they are *overseers* -- who will one day be responsible to *give an account to Jesus Christ* for how they have served HIS flock.

And note further that there are certain, specific individuals who have been given this responsibility by Jesus Christ Himself, and are answerable *directly to Him*.

Building Up the Church

One more Scripture we could look at is Eph 4:11-13, "And He Himself gave *some* to be apostles, *some* prophets, *some* evangelists, and *some* pastors and teachers" -- only *some* are called to fulfil these functions -- and WHY? -- "for the *equipping of the saints* for the work of ministry, for the EDIFYING (building up) of the body of Christ" -- and has this time now past? -- are we now mature enough to do without these Christ-appointed functions? -- "TILL we *all* come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" -- and looking around the Churches of God we clearly haven't got to this level yet!

What will be the result of the service of these men of God among the brethren? "That we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by *every wind of doctrine*, by the trickery of men ... but, speaking the truth in love, may GROW UP in all things into Him who is the Head -- Christ", vs 14-15.

These faithful men, by their labour among us, teaching us to *hold fast* and instructing us in SOUND DOCTRINE, help us to develop the very character of Jesus Christ -- growing up, and maturing spiritually -- till we reach the "measure of the stature and fullness" of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Hopefully, we can see the following points brought out in the Scriptures:

- God has placed *overseers* or elders in the church
- such men must be *qualified*
- the elders are *to take care* of the church
- the elders are *to shepherd* and protect the flock
- the elders are *to be examples* of Christian living
- the elders are to labour *in the word* and sound doctrine
- the elders are *to hold fast* to the truths they have received
- the elders are to be respected and appreciated for the work they do
- the elders are *to build up* the Body of Christ
- the elders are to one day *give an account* of their service to Jesus Christ

If there is one word that should describe the ministry of God it is the word SERVICE -- the elders are appointed in the church *to serve* -- to give of their time, resources, energy, wisdom, whatever gifts they have -- *to help* the men and women of God to fully develop the holy, righteous perfect character of Jesus Christ. They cannot do it for us -- we all have individual *free moral agency*, and must make our OWN DECISIONS -- but the ministers are there to assist, to help, to encourage, to be an example, in whatever way they can.

As Mr Mortensen said in a sermon earlier this year on *God's Ministry*, the true ministers of God are appointed to a "level of servitude *and slavery* to the people of God. You can't resign ... you can't retire ... even if you want to!"

In Eph 4:8,11 we read that it was Jesus Christ *Himself* who "gave GIFTS to men ... and He Himself *gave* some to be apostles ... prophets

... evangelists ... pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints". The true ministers of God are *a gift* from Christ to the church. Let's deeply respect and appreciate Christ's special gift!