

THE MAKING OF A MINISTER OF THE WORD

Based on *The Ministry of God's Word*, by Watchman Nee

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INTRODUCTION

1. Watchman Nee,¹ one of the most famous Chinese Christians of the twentieth century, had a passion for ministering God's word. He was an immensely popular teacher and preacher within China and gained an extensive following in the Western world as well. His many devotional expositions are still being published and eagerly read today.
2. In 1948, Nee delivered a series of addresses at a training school for Christian workers in Kuling, Foochow, China. These were subsequently translated and published in 1971 in a book called "The Ministry of God's Word."² To the best of my knowledge it has never been widely used in seminaries and Bible colleges in the West. To those schooled in the disciplines of scientific exegesis and hermeneutics it cannot but appear overly (and perhaps even dangerously) devotional and mystical. However, to this writer anyway, it ought not be lightly set aside. Admittedly, *The Ministry of God's Word* differs in emphasis and approach from the standard works on preaching that line the bookshelves of pastors and college libraries today. But that is not to say that it has no value for contemporary preachers and teachers. It needs to be appreciated as coming from a tradition marked more by spiritual awareness and relational intimacy than by scientific objectivity, logic and analysis. That it should stem from such a tradition (more reminiscent of the world of the Old Testament than modern Western society) ought not condemn it as primitive or irrelevant. Indeed, the spiritual awareness it exudes is often sadly missing in the ministry of the word today. Personally, I have been both challenged and helped by much of what Nee has written on this subject. It is the personal benefit that I have gained from his ideas that prompts me to extract and present in this paper the essence of his thoughts on the ministry of the word.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1. In the opening paragraphs of his book Nee outlines the importance of the ministry of the word. It is important firstly because God works through his word. Just as he created through his word in the beginning,³ so he continues the work of re-creating humanity through his word today.⁴ He is a speaking God, and accomplishes his work through his word. "We learn from the Bible," Nee writes, "that God has a prime work on earth which is to utter his own word. If the word of God is taken away, then almost nothing is left of God's work. No word, no work. Where the word is eliminated, the work is reduced to near zero.... The work of God is filled with his word."⁵ This fact is what, above all else, makes the ministry of the word important today.
2. But secondly, the ministry of the word is important because God chooses to speak his word today through people. This is why the "ministry of the word" is necessary. If God were to speak his word directly to every person, or if he were to use angels as his agents, there would be no need to have men and women serve others by ministering the word to them. However, God has chosen this means to make his word known. Having revealed it through various means (culminating in the appearance of his Son, the living Word), he commits it into the hands of people to make it known to others. Ministering the word is serving others with the word God has made known.⁶

¹ Watchman Nee (Ni Shu-tsu or Henry Nee) was born in Swatow in the Foochow Province of China 4th November 1903 and died on 1st June 1972.

² Publishers details

³ Gen. 1:3; Ps. 33:6

⁴ See for example 1 Peter 1:23; 2:2; Eph. 5:26

⁵ p. 9

⁶ p. 9

And because this is God's way of doing things, the ministry of the word is as essential to the work of God in the world as is the word itself.⁷

II. THE NATURE OF THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

1. Nee not only wants his readers to be impressed with the importance of the ministry of the word but also to understand exactly what it entails. It is this – the precise nature of the ministry of the word – that makes the character of the minister himself so important. Once the nature of the ministry of the word is understood, it will become clear what is required of someone to be a minister of that word.
2. To establish this, Nee compares the way in which God used Old Testament prophets, the ministry of the Lord Jesus, and the preaching and teaching of the apostles and other New Testament ministers of the word. The key feature of the Old Testament prophets, he argues, was their objectivity in mediating God's revelation. By and large they simply spoke the word of God as it came to them. In the case of the prophets of Israel anyway, God was often just employing their mouths to utter his words. They were the channels or vehicles for making his actual words known to people.
3. In the case of the Lord Jesus, however, the process of revelation was much more subjective. Jesus was himself the Word.⁸ As the "word made flesh", all his thoughts, actions, feelings and choices revealed the word of God. In him, God communicated through human personality and action. The word "was dressed in man; therefore it had human feeling, thought and opinion, though it remained God's word.... It was God's desire that His word should carry human feeling, thought, and idea through a personality."⁹ This was the unique feature of the ministry of God's word through Christ. And it established a key principle, namely, that is it possible for God's word to be conveyed through human personality without being impaired. "The presence of human feeling does not necessarily ruin God's word; it does so only when such feeling is inadequate."¹⁰
4. The ministry of the New Testament apostles was, Nee claims, patterned more closely on the ministry of Jesus than that of the prophets. By this he means that there is generally a greater personal (or subjective) element in New Testament ministry of the word than there was in the ministry of the prophets in the Old Testament. The principle of communication in the prophetic ministry is captured in the announcement formula, "Thus says the Lord." Today, however, following the pattern of the incarnation, "God desires that his word, delivered through New Testament ministers, should be blended with human elements."¹¹ The Lord Jesus did not deliver words to his disciples simply to be recited verbatim in every situation they encountered. They lived with him, saw and heard him, and then went out in the power of the Spirit to bear witness to him. They spoke as the Spirit within them called to mind the word of the Lord (and the Old Testament scriptures) and expressed this in ways pertinent to their hearers. And in doing so, judging by the New Testament writings anyway, they incorporated a great deal of the human element into what they said. Paul, for example, repeatedly draws attention to himself, his feelings and his experiences, and does so in ways we have come to recognize as distinctly Pauline. Yet in doing so, he was still speaking the word of God.¹² God's word in the New Testament, to put it another way, is ministered through human instruments and bears the imprint of the personalities of those instruments.¹³

⁷ "Not only is there the word in the Bible; there is also the minister of the word. Were God to speak directly himself, he would not need a minister of the word. Since the word is delivered by man, the minister of the word becomes a real concern.... God employs no other way than man to deliver His word." p. 9

⁸ Jn 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word...."

⁹ p. 12

¹⁰ pp. 12,13

¹¹ p. 16

¹² See, for example, 1 Thess. 2:13. Paul's preaching at Thessalonica, as elsewhere, was not the mere recitation of the words of Jesus. It was based on these words, and the Old Testament revelation, but came through his own Spirit-enabled processes of thought and feeling. Yet, in spite of the human element, he can still speak of it as the "word of God" and not that of a man.

¹³ "The New Testament is full of human elements; still, it is God's word. Each writer maintains his emphasis, uses his special phrases, and retains his characteristics. Through these, God's word is delivered without suffering

5. What was true in a special way of the apostles, Nee maintains, is true for preachers and teachers generally today. God has given his word to us today not simply to be recited, but to be ministered to others through our total humanity. “God does not predetermine every word, asking you to repeat them” he says. “Should this be the way, there would not be difficulty, for you would discharge your responsibility by simply repeating every word. No, God does not wish to proclaim his word in this fashion. He puts his word, like living water, in us to be taken in first before it flows out. He gives us light, burden, and a few distinctive words, that we may stand before men and proclaim them.”¹⁴ The process is essentially (though not exactly) the same for modern preachers as it was for the apostles. God puts his word within us (by illumining the Scriptures), and then sends us out to express that word through our own personalities and feelings in ways fitted to the needs of our hearers. The ministry of the word today, in other words, still involves a human or subjective element.
6. If that is indeed the case, then the human messenger becomes an important factor in the ministry of the word. Potentially, anyway, it becomes a factor that may hinder or impede the communication of the word of God to others. It was one thing for the word of God to be mediated through the humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was sinless and his thoughts, feelings and actions all harmonized perfectly with the message he had to deliver. Indeed, they were the message he delivered. In Jesus, the word existed before the humanity. His humanity fulfilled and revealed that word perfectly. But that is not so with us. In our case, that which exists first is the human nature – sinful human nature. And that sinful nature, as it expresses the word of God to others through its thoughts and feelings and actions, is perfectly capable of marring and hindering the message.¹⁵ Because of that, God has to deal with his human ministers to make them useable. “In the New Testament ministry of the word,” writes Nee, “we have the flesh first: in order to make it a minister of the word, this flesh must be transformed according to the requirements of God’s word. The feeling, thought, and idea of the flesh must undergo a change that it might be suitable to God’s word.”¹⁶

III. THE MAKING OF A MINISTER OF THE WORD

1. In order to use men, God has to deal with them. “Do not think that just anybody can preach the word of God,” Nee writes. “We know of only one kind of person who may preach it - those who have been dealt with by God. The greatest difficulty we confront in preaching the word is not whether the subject is proper or the phraseology correct, but whether the man is right. If the man is wrong, all which emanates from him is likewise wrong.”¹⁷ This is what makes ministering the

any loss. Having man’s marks and possessing human characteristics, but nonetheless remaining God’s word - such is the New Testament ministry. God’s word is entrusted to man and conveyed through human elements.” pp. 16,17

¹⁴ p. 47 Elsewhere he writes, “God’s wish is to use man. Man was created for God’s specific purpose. As he did not make an obedient machine at the time of creation, so he now rejects the use of a preaching machine. He does not want an automaton; he wants a man with free will. It is a calculated risk with God to choose man as a minister of his word. Yet in spite of the complexity of man and his many problems such as sin, defilement, weakness, the outward man, and natural resistance, God still entrusts his word to man.” p. 45 “God does not put his word in man for man to repeat verbatim. He puts his word in man for the latter to search out with his mind. He gives light to man that man may grasp it and think on it. He places a burden in man for him to find appropriate words to express that burden. It is man who thinks, searches and speaks; even so, God is able to acknowledge that it is in truth his very own word.” pp. 45-46

¹⁵ “If the man is wrong and mingles his unclean things in and with the word, he defiles the word of God, greatly damaging it.” p. 20

¹⁶ p. 15 “God must not only put his word in these New Testament ministers but must deal with them as well. He needs to raise them to the level he demands. He will use their thoughts, feelings and characteristics, but these have to be dealt with first. So God deals with these New Testament ministers in respect to their experiences, words, feelings, cleverness, opinion, characteristics and other areas in order that his word might be communicated through them.” p. 15

¹⁷ p. 20. According to Nee, sin is the greatest hindrance to a person becoming an effective minister of the word. If we are not up to God’s standard, he cannot use us. “God has to lay aside those whose makeup contains many uncleannesses, fleshly things, and matters condemned by God. Others he has to bypass because they have never

word of God so costly. Were it simply a matter of reciting or reading words, then the human messenger would not matter so much. But since ministry of the word takes place through human personality, the minister himself becomes vitally important.

2. In dealing with people, God prunes and refines them to bring their lives into harmony with the word they will minister.¹⁸ This involves daily discipline. God constantly works within us through his word and through the circumstances of life to break and humble us. He is looking for ministers who have broken and contrite hearts, hearts weaned from the world and devoted to his glory.¹⁹ “We become channels of living water only after the Holy Spirit has succeeded in breaking and grinding us down. Our outward man needs this breaking by God. It needs drastic and thorough dealings.”²⁰ If we have not been chastened we cannot do the work of the Lord. “A minister of the Word needs to rise very high before God; only then will his word come through,” writes Nee. “The pureness of the word released depends on the amount of discipline received before God. The more the man is broken, the purer the word; the less that he has been learned, the more corrupt the release. The ministry of the word is based on the condition of the man before the Lord.”²¹
3. This pruning and purifying discipline of the human spirit is not to be confused with the crushing and destroying of natural character and temperament. God’s dealing with his ministers is with their sinfulness, not with their natural gifts and characteristics. Our individual personalities are important in the sight of God. Our natural self-reliance, judgment, wisdom and confidence – in short, all of our natural life – must be broken before God. But this is not so he might reject our humanity, but that it might be brought into submission to him. Nothing about our background or makeup is without meaning or a product of chance. “Whatever may be your characteristics, temperament, inclination and strength are prearranged and prepared by God,” Nee says. There can be no accident, for everything is within God’s providence. Nothing comes by chance. Even a man’s natural ability and experience are prearranged for future service.”²² Everything about our past has been carefully “calculated and specifically appointed”²³ to prepare us for the definite course that has been appointed for us.
4. Only a person who has in this way been chastened by the Holy Spirit is able to receive and channel the word of God without impairing it. Eloquence and cleverness are not the main prerequisites of ministers. Having the word of God deeply within us, and flowing from us unhindered is. “The ministry of the word is not the mere delivery of sermons we memorize. We must allow the word to come to us, to drill us and to grind us, until it flows out with – yes, our personal elements in it – and yet not spoiled or corrupted in the least. The Lord wishes to use us as a channel of living water. The very depth of our being is the channel. For the living water to flow freely from us, we must be right before God; otherwise we will hinder his word.”²⁴ God’s appointed way is to entrust his word to those who have been dealt with by the Holy Spirit. His hand is heavy upon them to bring them to the point of being usable.²⁵

been broken before God, or their thoughts are not straightforward, or their lives are undisciplined, their necks still stiff, their emotions untamed, or they have a controversy with God. Even if these individuals receive God’s word, they are not able to deliver it because it is blocked within them. Should they force themselves to preach, the word is ineffective. Hence man’s condition before God is a basic problem for New Testament ministers.” p. 18

¹⁸ This means too, of course, that we are brought into harmony with God himself. “He so works in you that all your opinion, thought and feeling will be like his.” p. 47

¹⁹ “A broken, stricken human spirit is a usable spirit.” p. 30

²⁰ pp. 27-28. “What we need is the incorporating work of the Holy Spirit. We need him to work in us and so fashion us that all our opinions, words, thoughts and feelings do not contradict God’s word. Thus shall we be ministers of His word.” p. 51

²¹ p. 39

²² p. 32

²³ p. 31

²⁴ p. 27

²⁵ pp. 28, 41

IV. THE NEED FOR MINISTERS OF THE WORD

1. If God's work is so closely tied to prepared ministers of the word, then clearly there is great need for them. While God is perfectly able to work without them, he has nevertheless chosen to work through them. Necessarily, then, the extent of God's work in the world is connected with the abundance and calibre of those who minister his word in the world. The condition of the church at any point in time can be attributed (in part at least) to the faithfulness of those who preach and teach the word. "The poverty and darkness of the church is due to our condition," wrote Nee, speaking of his own day.²⁶ "The main trouble in the church is the lack of ministers of the word. It is not the rarity of God's word nor the infrequency of vision and light, but the scarcity of those who can be used by the Lord."²⁷
2. If this is indeed true, it places an enormous responsibility upon those who minister the word. The work of God and the health of the church depend in no small measure on their faithfulness. "All the problems today" according to Nee, "rest on the shoulders of the minister. Were all the messages on earth today truly the ministry of the Word, how rich the church would be! But alas, there is much preaching yet so little word! This is the problem of the church today... God does not want to speak alone, yet man is unusable - this is the crux of the problem."²⁸ What God looks for in every generation is people who can be used to minister his word. Where and when he finds them (or better still, raises them up), he is able to work copiously through them. But without them, his work languishes.
3. This confronts those of us entrusted with his word today with an immense challenge. From a human point of view, the work of God depends upon us. But to be used by God we must be constantly broken down by him and filled with his word. There is a high cost to pay in being a faithful minister of God, entrusted not simply with reading his word but with being a channel of living water, expressing in thought, feeling word and action the truth of God. Are we willing to pay it? Or will we take the lower, easier path of delivering words without life and power. "May we solemnly pray: O Lord, break us that thy word may flow through us. May God be gracious to us."²⁹

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²⁶ p. 53

²⁷ p. 40

²⁸ p. 29

²⁹ p. 53