

CHAPTER NINE

The Work of the Ministry

Many are asking today, "Where is Jesus Christ at work in our world? How does he touch the problems of society today, at the end of the twentieth century?"

The answer is that He is at work *exactly* as He was at work in His lifetime on earth, carrying out precisely the same strategy! Two-thousand years ago, He did His work through one solitary, earthly, physical body. Today, He carries on the same work through a complex, many-faceted, corporate body which exists around the world, permeating and penetrating every level of society. It is called "the church," the body of Christ--but its ministry is to the same human race that Jesus ministered to, experiencing the same issues and conditions, facing the same attitudes and problems.

As we have already seen, our Lord has endowed His corporate body with an array of spiritual gifts, capable of many combinations, and designed to establish and improve relationships between any individual and God. Our Lord has also provided the members of his body with a new kind of power--resurrection power!--which operates silently yet powerfully as a result of Christ's life within every believer. It is only when a Christian uses His spiritual gifts in resurrection power that His life becomes an extension of the incarnate life of Jesus. At all other times, His activity is only that of the "natural" man without spiritual effect or power.

To reach the world

In focusing on the gifts of the Spirit and the power in which they operate, we must not lose sight of the two fold reason for the manifestation of these gifts. These are clearly stated as: (1) unto the work of the ministry, and (2) unto the building up of the body of Christ. The gifts are given to be useful in these two realms, the world and the church. We must continually remember that the work of the ministry is to the world. The church exists as God's instrument to reach the world. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).

It is clearly God's intention that, through the true church, the world might see Jesus Christ at work. The world needs His ministry desperately, but it was never intended that worldlings should come to the church to find Christ. Rather, the church was intended to move out into the world! The body of Christ was designed by God to be incarnate in the world, present in the world, visible in the marketplaces and public squares of the world. If the worldlings are able to see the body of Christ among them, ministering to them, challenging them, loving them, reaching them, they will understand that Jesus Christ is not dead and gone. He is here among them, in the form of ordinary believers.

Jesus Christ is active in the here and now. He's not off in some remote corner of the universe, not viewing the world through a telescope from heaven. He has not left His people here to struggle and flounder until He comes back again. Christ is alive and has been at work in human society for twenty centuries, just as He said He would be: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

What, specifically, is the ministry of the body of Christ? Let us hear the answer from His own lips. It is found in one of the most dramatic and riveting scenes in the New Testament, as recorded in Luke 4. It is our Lord's own description of the ministry He came to accomplish on earth, whether in His physical body of flesh or in His corporate (but no less physical) body of the church. In Luke 4:16 we read, "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went into the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah."

Jesus began His ministry in the cities around the lake of Galilee with his headquarters in Capernaum. He then made an extensive journey into Jerusalem and Judea where he did many miracles. He soon gained a reputation throughout the land as a doer of good deeds and a worker of miracles. Word had come back to Nazareth, His hometown, of the strange and remarkable things this local youth had been doing. Now He has returned and everyone in town knows that He will be in the synagogue on the sabbath day. They all turn out to hear Him for they are anxiously hoping that He will do among them some of the miracles He has done in other cities.

But in the synagogue He calls for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and--unrolling it to the proper place, which in our Old Testament is Isaiah 64--He reads the following passage: "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'" And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:17-21).

There must have been many puzzled looks among the townspeople of Nazareth at this point. They must have said to themselves, "What does He mean? How could He say this Scripture was fulfilled among us when He has done no miracles in Nazareth at all?" Knowing this thought was in their hearts, Jesus went on to say: "Doubtless you will quote to me the proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country'" (Luke 4:23).

Then he went on to remind them that in the history of Israel, prophets were often not received in their own country by their own people. He cited the examples of Elijah and Elisha, who worked miracles of blessing for the Gentiles but did not do the same for any Israelites.

In what sense, therefore, did he mean that Isaiah's great prophecy of the Messiah had been fulfilled in Nazareth? He undoubtedly meant for them to see that the physical fulfillment of these predictions (opening blind eyes, healing the lame, and so forth) was not the sole intent of Scripture. The Messiah would indeed begin on that level in order to capture attention and evoke trust in himself, but he would also fulfill the predictions at a deeper and more important level--the level of the human spirit. It is the healing of the human spirit which God is really after, and it was on this level that the prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled in Nazareth.

The error of Israel

The majority in Nazareth had their expectations set on the physical alone. They wanted to be amazed by the sight of an honest-to-goodness physical miracle. They refused to accept the Lord's statement that ultimate fulfillment could be found only in the healing of the human spirit, not through awesome displays of divine power. When it became clear that He had no intention of working miracles, when they saw He was claiming divine appointment as the Messiah without demonstrating any miraculous proof of His claim, they went ballistic! The crowd turned into a lynch mob, and attempted to push him off the edge of the big cliff upon which Nazareth is built.

It has been often pointed out that the miracles which Jesus did are also *parables*. They make a vivid point on a physical level that symbolizes what Christ wants us to understand on the deeper level of the spirit. The mistake the Jews made during our Lord's ministry was that they would not accept the deep spiritual reality He tried to show them; instead, they were obsessed with seeing outward, physical signs and miracles. Paul said that this obsession with outward signs rather than inner reality continued to be the desire of the Jews even after the crucifixion, and that they would not believe the Gospel without some kind of sign (see 1 Cor. 1:22).

Those who hunger and thirst for physical miracles today are repeating this error of Israel. They constantly seek something visible, something spectacular, something clearly supernatural. It's a sad fact of human nature: We would rather see bread multiplied or water turned into wine than see the inner transformation of a human life! Somehow, walking on water seems like more of a miracle to us than the deliverance of a human soul from the darkness of sin! That is the error of Israel: Jesus made it clear to the people of Nazareth that the Messiah had come among them, fulfilling the ancient prophecies right before their eyes--but they didn't want to see liberated

lives, they wanted to see a miracle show!

With this in mind, let's take a closer look at the words which Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah, for this passage describes not only the physical fulfillment which occurred in the days of Jesus' physical life on earth, but also the fulfillment which will occur through you and me as Christians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

You may recall that Jesus said of His disciples, "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (John 14:12). What are these "greater works"? From Jesus' perspective, it is clear that anything done in the realm of the spirit is greater than any miracle done in the body.

The physical raising of Lazarus from the tomb was truly amazing--yet it was next to nothing compared with the miracle of a sinner whose life has been completely redirected by the grace and love of God. All the bodily miracles and healings which Jesus performed were just temporary cures. Lazarus, for example, eventually had to go through death again. But the works that Jesus did within the human heart and human soul was an eternal work, yielding blessing that went on and on without end.

When Jesus went to the Father, He sent back the Holy Spirit, whose role it is to reproduce the life of Jesus in the believer. This is why Jesus is able to say that the church will do greater works than He Himself did upon the earth--because it is not really the church (or the individual Christian) doing those works. Rather, those works are being done by a risen, ascended Lord through the Holy Spirit, acting within the body of believers, the church.

There are four divisions in this work of the ministry that is described by Isaiah. These four divisions are introduced by the phrase, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me" (Luke 4:18). What follows is a description of a Spirit-filled ministry. As Jesus was anointed by the Spirit for His ministry in His lifetime, so each believer must be filled with the Spirit for the work he is to do.

How can other people tell when the Spirit of God is at work in a certain person's life? Will it be by the display of some strange phenomenon, or by a miraculous manifestation? No, the Spirit-filled ministry will be the kind of ministry described by Isaiah. It will open spiritually blinded eyes, make the spiritually lame walk, free those spiritually held captive, and so forth. That is the purpose of a Spirit-filled life.

First, the work of the ministry is to evangelize: "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The first division of the work of the ministry is that the saints (ordinary Christians) are to declare the good news of God's activity in human history. That is evangelism. The good news is that God has not left the human race to struggle hopelessly in bewilderment, pain, and darkness. God has done something about the human condition. He has acted to deliver us from darkness to light through his Son, Jesus Christ. The Lord of the Universe has gone to the cross and taken our sins upon Him. He hasn't merely spoken; He has acted. Through the resurrection, He has given men and women His own life, which empowers them to truly live. To tell this story is to preach the good news.

To whom is this good news to be preached? Clearly, it is not to be preached to the rich but to the poor! What does this mean? Surely it doesn't mean only those who are below the poverty line, and who are poor in the material things of this world! Aren't the rich and the wealthy to hear this good news too? Obviously, the prophecy goes beyond mere physical poverty, penetrating to the spiritual poverty of men and women.

Remember the first words of the greatest sermon ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount? It begins with a remarkable recipe for happiness, the Beatitudes. "Blessed [or happy] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is, happy is the man who doesn't have any resources left in his spirit, and he knows it. Happy is the person who does not have any standing before God, who does not have a long record of good works to rest on, who does not rely on a self-satisfied, self-righteous attitude. Happy is the person who comes to God and says, "Be merciful to me, a sinner!" God is then able to give to that person the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus never wasted much time with the self-righteous and the self-sufficient. He preached to the poor in spirit.

Don't waste time talking to people who think they have everything they need. Look for those who have nothing--but don't be fooled by appearances. Don't be misled by the fact that some pretend to have everything while underneath there is a searching, hungry heart. Some of the richest people in the world are also the emptiest. So get down to the heart-need and heart-poverty of that person. Preach the good news to the poor.

Release and recovery

The next assignment within the work of the ministry consists of two factors: (1) "to proclaim release to the captives" and (2) "recovering of sight to the blind" (Luke 4:18). Release and recovery of sight. Liberty and light.

Do you know any captives, any people who are bound by outlooks and attitudes which hold them in perpetual captivity? Do you know anyone who is struggling to free himself from hurtful habits which hold him in a vise-like grip? Do you know any people who are locked into a pattern of poisonous hate, or jealous bitterness, or possessive greed which they seem powerless to break? Are you such a person yourself? Then there is good news! Jesus Christ is able to set you free. He has done it for millions and he can do it for you.

Are there people who are blind today? Are there men and women who think they are doing the right thing and who mean to do the right thing but somehow it always turns out wrong? They are blind, they cannot see to the end of the paths they are on. Often they are perfectly sincere, honest people who hope they are doing right and are struggling along as well as they can. But nothing works out for them, and they end up stumbling blindly from one episode to another, deeper and deeper into difficulty. Aren't these people blind? Absolutely! They need the ministry Jesus announced in Luke 4:18--the recovery of sight to the blind.

This releasing and recovering ministry is the result of teaching the truth. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (John 8:32). Truth releases captives and restores sight. Truth doesn't mean telling people what they want to hear, but what they *need* to hear. Jesus said, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12).

That is also the work of teaching: To disciple people and show them how to follow Jesus. Following Jesus means so much more than simply coming to church, singing hymns, and reciting creeds. It means obeying Him, even when every fiber of our being cries out to seek sin or selfishness. The work of teaching touches every compartment of our lives--our work, our family relationships, our friendships, our school relationships, the use of our spare time, our entertainment choices, our political involvement, our social concern, and on and on. Part of the work of the ministry is to teach men and women, boys and girls, how to lay hold of the power that releases them from captivity, so that they can boldly follow and obey the One who opens our eyes and leads us out of darkness and into the light.

A demonic element

The next element of a Spirit-filled ministry is to set at liberty those who are oppressed (Luke 4:18). At first glance this seems similar to proclaiming release to captives. It is true that the end result is the same: liberty. But the problem of oppression is a much deeper and more serious one than mere captivity. Oppression has a demonic element about it. It is more than mere tyranny, there is also a terrible cruelty involved. It results in a sense of burden, of dejection and depression, coupled with hopelessness.

A man once drove over 600 miles to tell me of a heavy burden which was oppressing him. For over a year he had been terribly affected by an attitude of hate toward another man who had done him a great injustice. He could not free himself of his bitterness and rancor. It began to trouble him so that he could not eat or sleep properly. On two or three occasions he had barely been able to restrain himself from committing murder. It was breaking him up, destroying his family, and threatening his own life. He was troubled by constant depression and despair.

We talked together and I showed him the truth of the Scripture about his unforgiving spirit. I gently explained to him that he was poisoning his own life by his hatred, and that there could be no release until he was able to forgive the man who had offended him. He agreed to ask God for the grace to forgive, and we prayed

together.

As we prayed, I watched his face and before my eyes a miracle--a genuine act of supernatural grace and power!--took place. I saw a man healed in front of my eyes. I saw a burden of bitterness and spiritual oppression lifted. I saw the poison of hate drain out of this man's heart as the love of Jesus Christ came flooding in. His whole attitude was visibly transformed, and he went home with a look of peace on his face and a sense of God's joy in his heart.

This is one example of the ministry of counseling and prayer which gives liberty to the oppressed. It doesn't take a pastor to do it, but can be accomplished by any Christian who knows the truth of the Word and has the faith to pray.

This man should not have had to drive 600 miles to find someone to help him. But unfortunately this ministry of prayer-counseling has been left for the professional counsellor to handle. As a result, emotional and spiritual problems which could have been easily handled when small have been allowed to grow into tangled knots which even professionals cannot always handle. Prayer is particularly effective in problems of this type. As Jesus once said of a demon-ridden boy, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer" (Mark 9-29).

The last element of the work of Christ's body in the world today is "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4.19). This is one of the most remarkable statements in the Bible. If you will look up the original passage in Isaiah from which Jesus read, you will discover that there is a comma after the word "Lord." The sentence is not complete at that point. In the original it goes on to say "and to declare the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:1,2). The Lord Jesus did not read that part of the script. At the comma, He abruptly closed the book and handed it back, saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21).

Why did Jesus stop reading at that point? The answer is clear. He was implying that at that particular point in time, the rest of Isaiah's prophecy was not yet fulfilled. Today, as I write these words, that remainder of Isaiah's prophecy is still unfulfilled. That fulfillment could take place a second from now, a year from now, or a thousand years from now. The day of vengeance of our God awaits the second return of Jesus Christ. But the present age is the acceptable year of the Lord. Salvation is still possible.

When we proclaim this great fact, we explain and make clear what is happening in our world. We relieve the cold grip of fear which clutches at the hearts of thousands who get up every morning scared to death, not knowing what will happen to a world that has apparently gone quite mad. They open their newspapers or turn on CNN, and they see reports of terrorist attacks, bombings, nerve gas attacks, random murders, car-jackings, gang violence, riots, racial strife, political upheaval, wars and rumors of wars--and they are afraid that history is spinning out of control! They fear that God has lost command over human events--if He ever had control! They feel lost, like hopeless, helpless victims of inexorable forces far beyond their ability to understand, much less control.

The people of our world today desperately need to hear Christians proclaim to them the acceptable year of the Lord. They need to see from the Scriptures that God knows what He is doing in our day and age. They need to hear that God is restraining the forces of evil for a season, in order to permit the Gospel to go out, while permitting a sufficient demonstration of the evil in man so that we will see our own sinfulness and helplessness, and recognize our need of God.

The Lord is governing human events according to His own purposes and His own timetable. The acceptable year of the Lord will go on only as long as God decrees--and then comes "the day of vengeance of our God"! But until the acceptable year of the Lord ends and the terrible day of vengeance falls, no human being can go beyond God's limits of restraint.

This, then, is the fourfold work of the ministry: evangelizing, teaching, praying, and explaining the times. This is the fourfold task of the church in the world.

Is it relevant? Is it something people need, something they are dying for, something they are desperate to find? I will leave that for you to answer. But if you see it as I do you will recognize that nothing could be more

exciting and fulfilling than to be involved in ministry like this!

If you are a Christian, this is *your* ministry. To this end, you have been equipped and prepared by God as He has given you certain spiritual gifts. It is for this purpose that you have within you the resurrection power of the risen Lord from which to draw. The pastor and evangelist, along with the apostles and prophets, were never intended to do this ministry alone. Rather, they have been given to help you carry out this ministry yourself!

A normal part of life

You might say, "But when can I do this? After all, I have to earn a living! I don't have time to go about preaching and teaching!" There's an easy answer to that: Do the work of the ministry God has given you wherever you are. Do it at work. Do it in your home. Do it on the golf course and the tennis court. Do it at the grocery store and on the campus. This ministry is as natural and normal a part of life as anything else you can do.

Obviously, the majority of Christians spend their time doing the work of the work--and this is as it should be. Not everyone is called to be a pastor, an evangelist, or even a teacher. The major preoccupation of any person's life is his or her daily employment. But if Jesus Christ has no part in that, then He is Lord only of the margins of your life--of your leftover moments, your spare time.

Have you ever noticed that the really important figures of the New Testament are not the priests and monks. They are shepherds, fishermen, taxgatherers, soldiers, politicians, tentmakers, physicians, and carpenters! These are the ones who occupy the center of the stage. So it must be again today.

You can tell the good news of God at work around a water cooler in an office if the occasion is right. Or to another, over a lunch bucket. You can heal a hurting heart as you're going home in the carpool. You can teach the truth that liberates people over a cup of coffee in a kitchen or the back fence. You can pray the prayer of deliverance beside a sick bed. You can interject Christian insights into business transactions or governmental problems--and the insights you share may mean the difference between conflict and strife, hope and despair, or even heaven and hell for the person whose life you touch!

A Christian man once told me that he is a member of an urban renewal committee in San Francisco, responsible for clearing up slum areas in the city. At one of their meetings, the board considered setting up a new housing project in an area already crowded with tenements and flats. They faced the question of what to do about the people who would be displaced until the new housing was ready. There was a general feeling of, "That's their problem, let them take care of it."

But this Christian man said, "No, it is not their problem. It's our problem. We have no right to put in a housing project unless we face the responsibility of helping these people find some other place to live. Christian compassion can do nothing less!" He stood his ground, and because he spoke up at a critical moment, he made the committee face their responsibility and they eventually found a way to solve it.

In these perilous, polarized, apocalyptic times, it is easy to find an occasion to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. It is almost impossible to avoid it! You can quiet the fearful with a reassuring word of hope in almost any situation. All you need is a newspaper headline or a television commentary, and you have a wide open door to tell men of what God is doing in history and where he says it will all end.

We must never forget our Lord's story of the sheep and the goats, and the basis of His judgment between them. The whole point of the story is that Christians must not evade activities that involve them in the pain of the world. The hungry must be fed, the naked must be clothed, the sick must be visited, and those in prison must be helped to find the liberating Lord in the midst of their confinement.

God has given us all the gifts we need to carry out His eternal plan and strategy for the church. We dare not hide our gifts in the ground as the unfaithful servant did in the Lord's parable (see Matt. 25:14-30). When the acceptable year of the Lord has ended and we meet our Lord face to face, He will ask us for an accounting of

how we have used our gifts in the body of Christ.

Now is the time we have to perform the tasks God has given us. Let us begin right *now* to put our gifts to work!

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