

Some Words About...

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Leitourgia (ministry) - λειτουργία

The Greek word *leitourgia* means “ministry.” It has distinctly religious associations.

In the Septuagint

The book of Numbers records that the Levites “entered to do ministry in the tent of meeting with Aaron” (8:22) and that Moses in censuring the Levites pointed out that the Lord had “permitted them to do ministry” in the Lord’s tabernacle (16:9). And Moses tells Aaron that the Levites shall “do ministry in the tent of meeting” (18:4).

New Testament

In Luke 1:23 Zechariah was on duty as priest before God, charged with burning incense, when he had a vision and was struck dumb. “When the days of his ministry were over” he went home. The twenty-four courses of priests took turns in the ministry, and Zechariah was of the eighth course, a hereditary office. We don’t often think of John the Baptist as a priest, but he too would have inherited that office; and his mother was a descendant of Aaron. Jesus’ relatives had close connections with the Temple. He would have known all about the ceremonies, rules, and regulations of the Temple — and also the expenses and sources of revenue.

Paul, on his way with the Macedonians and their aid for the saints in Jerusalem, wants to be sure that the Corinthian aid is ready when he passes through Corinth. He wants no complications in their ministry. So he writes to the Corinthians that their generosity is not just kindness, that “this act of ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints” but also expresses their thanks to God for his bounty to them (2 Corinthians 9:12). It was, after all, the church in Jerusalem from which the apostles were sent to evangelize the world. Paul himself had gone to the Jerusalem church and conferred with its leaders to establish the legitimacy of his interpretation of the gospel. The Gentiles as a whole owed much to the Jerusalem church, and the financial support that the Gentile Christians sent to their fellow Christians in Jerusalem was simply concrete evidence of their appreciation.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul writes, “if I am persecuted as the offering and ministry for your faith, I am glad and I rejoice with you” (2:17). Later he says that he is sending Epaphroditus, along with Timothy, to calm the Philippians’ fears for Epaphroditus’s well-being. He writes of Epaphroditus as their “apostle and the one who acts as your minister” to Paul (2:25) and that Epaphroditus “risked his life in order to serve in ministry you were not able to give” (2:30). [A freedman named Epaphroditus became extremely wealthy and was appointed Secretary of State by the Emperor Domitian. Josephus dedicated two of his works to him. But Domitian persecuted the Christians, and he banished and then executed his former Secretary of State. I know of no one who claims that Domitian’s Epaphroditus was the same one Paul wrote about, but the idea certainly is intriguing.]

Summing up what he said about the priesthood, the author of Hebrews calls Jesus “a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle” (8:2) who “has obtained a superior ministry” (8:6). It becomes clear how important this superior ministry is when we see (in 9:1–12) the importance the author places on the old elements of ministry.

This leads some scholars to date the epistle before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. It is hard to see why so much attention would be devoted to the priesthood in chapters 5 through 9 if it were no longer of any importance.

Then, in emphasizing the importance of Jesus' shedding his blood for Christians' eternal redemption, the writer points out in gory detail how Moses sprinkled everything connected with worship with blood including "all the vessels of ministry" (9:21). He makes his point, but he rather overdoes it.

Today

Every Christian is a priest. Each Christian may pray directly to God without any intermediary. This is stated specifically in Matthew 6:9–13 and is implied throughout the New Testament. But every Christian is also a minister. Jesus made that plain (in Matthew 20:26–28 and elsewhere). And Paul emphasized the fact (Romans 12:6–8; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Ephesians 4:11–12). In his letter to Emser, Luther says that (in 2 Corinthians 3:6) Paul declares that "there are two kinds of preaching or ministries. One is that of the Old Testament, the other that of the New Testament. The Old Testament preaches the letter, the New Testament the spirit.

Our ministry is cosmic in its scope. We must never limit our ministry to the immediacies of our personal abilities, opportunities, or contacts. Humility is a wonderful thing, but it is one thing to be humble about our response to the calling and another dreadful thing to devalue the ministry to which we have been called. God approaches, speaks to, leads, comforts, and inspires God's people — through us. Whether it be a young insecure person entering a first pastorate, a successful city minister with a large congregation, a retired pastor, an institutional executive, or a seminary professor, the ministry is cosmic; it is God's ministry to God's world. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and the Word still uses living flesh — yours and mine — to make known the love of God in Jesus Christ.

¹ "Luther's Answer to Emser," *Works of Martin Luther*, vol. III, A.J. Holman, 1930, a Steimle translation, pp. 353ff.

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