

What Do You Think When You Hear The Word...Minister?

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[0 : 00] Two weeks ago in our evening service, last evening service that I was preaching here, I asked a question and the question was, what should you think of when you hear the word church?

So that was what we did two weeks ago. What should you think of when you hear the word church? And it was very helpful, well I hope it was helpful. I certainly found it helpful to think through some of the key words and phrases when we think of that word church.

Tonight, I want to do something maybe even a bit more different and I want to ask the same question but I want to think about a different word. And tonight we're asking the question, what should you think of when you hear the word minister?

Now, I feel a bit strange doing this because you think, I really hope it doesn't come across that I'm just talking about myself and that's the last thing I want to do and that's definitely not what we're trying to do this evening.

But one of the reasons I wanted to do this is because it's something that we just don't do. We don't tend to talk as a church family about ministers, about what's being involved and being a minister, about what we should think of when we hear that word minister.

[1 : 18] And no doubt that's because ministers like me don't really want to talk about it very much but I think it's a really good and important thing for us to talk about and I thought, well, we might as well just give it a go.

It's June, it's the end of term, you can get away with doing all sorts of different unusual things. So, let's spend a bit of time thinking about this together tonight.

We'll look at lots of different verses. I want to take, if you like, as a text, the words of Ephesians 3.7 where Paul writes, of this gospel, I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace which was given me by the working of his power.

There's obviously loads and loads that we could say about this. And so tonight we're just, I've just picked seven key words that I think should come to our minds.

There's probably many, many more and this is just really an introduction to this topic. But I hope it'll be a helpful one all the same. Seven key words, here they are.

[2 : 26] Believer, servant, sinner, elder, preacher, pastor, teacher, and that's kind of his one compound word, and brother.

And I'd like us to just look at all of these together one by one tonight. So we will start with believer. A couple of passages here that speak of this.

Paul is addressing fellow ministers, Timothy and Titus. And when he speaks to both of them, he gives this wonderful emphasis on their faith.

You see it in 2 Timothy 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that's in Christ Jesus, to Timothy, my beloved child. Good day to verse 3.

I thank God who my serve as did my ancestors with a clear conscience. As I remember you constantly in my prayers. As I remember your tears, I long to see you that I may be filled with joy.

[3 : 22] I'm reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now I'm sure dwells in you.

Same kind of thing is said to Titus, my true child in a common faith. Now this might seem like a really obvious thing to say.

You know that first and foremost a minister is a believer. But it's crucial to say this and to highlight it for at least two reasons.

First is because if you look back in history, you will actually discover that there are many people who were converted after they became a minister.

So the most famous name associated with the Free Church of Scotland is Thomas Chalmers. He was the leader of those who formed the Free Church in 1843.

[4 : 20] He was the first principal of New College, which was built by the Free Church after it was formed. And it was said that he was the greatest preacher in Scotland in the 19th century.

I want you to listen very carefully to this. Thomas Chalmers became a minister in 1803. He became a Christian in 1811. Became a minister in 1803.

He did not become a Christian until eight years later. And a lot of that was because in those days, you know, to be a minister was a very appealing career.

And apparently in his early years as a minister he was in Fife and he spent most of his week in St Andrews studying and teaching mathematics at the university. And he used to say, a couple of hours on a Saturday night is enough for your sermons for Sunday.

And then he spent the rest of the week back at the university. And it was in 1810, 1811 he became ill. All sorts of things happened. And in the midst of that, he came to faith and it transformed his life, transformed his ministry.

[5 : 32] And so if you look at history, you'll often see that that's true. You could have ministers who weren't believers. It's probably still true today.

If you look across the UK, if you look across the Western world, there are those who are ministers for whom their understanding of the Gospel is not based on grace.

Their understanding of the Gospel is just a moralistic message of, you know, let's do good and if we do enough good, then we'll get to heaven that way.

That still exists today. It existed in Thomas Chalmers' day as well. It's all reminding us that ministry is not just another job.

It's not just a career that you can choose with a kind of nominal connection to Christianity. It is something that must be done as a believer.

[6 : 32] And so that's an important point to emphasize to begin with. But the second thing is just to reiterate the fact that first and foremost, a minister is a believer. That's first and foremost what they are.

Paul speaks about this in terms of the common faith he shares with Titus. He speaks about the faith of Timothy that was in his grandmother Lois, his mother Eunice. That faith is so crucial to who they are and the calling to ministry only comes to somebody who is walking in faith.

A minister is a believer, a disciple, a follower of Jesus. And that immediately creates a common ground among us all because a minister has to believe in Jesus just as much as you do.

And a minister is completely lost without Jesus just as much as you are. And everything depends on a personal relationship with Jesus through faith.

But alongside that, I think it's also fair to say that following the call into ministry is a step of faith. I've done it myself and I'm now involved in helping people who apply for ministry and helping their training and everything.

[7 : 49] And I don't ever meet people who come and they're like, I'm going to be a minister and it'll all be absolutely fine. I've got it all planned out and I'm not worried at all. No, they're all like, oh, what's going to happen?

Will it be okay? Where will we end up? And I can't give them answers to that. Instead you have to step out in faith and allow God to help you along the way.

And a key part of that is because ministry is a life of faith. And I think that's a very important thing to remember that when we think about the work of ministry, sometimes, I don't know about you all, but I think I'm prone to be like this myself.

I like everything to be in control. I like to think, okay, everything's planned out. Everything's organized. Everything's going to be okay. And I can do it because I've got it all planned out.

If that's how I approach ministry, it's not a good thing. It's not a good thing because that basically is me relying on myself.

[8 : 50] Far better to be in the place where as a church, we are trying to do something and we think, Lord, you need to do it because we can't on our own.

And I can honestly say that our refurbishment work has been an amazing example of this because a year ago we started out with not enough money and not quite sure exactly what we were going to do with some of the things and not completely sure how it would all turn out.

And so we just have to say, Lord, you need to do it. And he did. And we need to have the same mindset for our mission work and for everything that we need to do.

Faith lies at the heart of that work of ministry. In fact, scripture also makes clear that believers, that ministers, Timothy, as we read, should actually set an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity.

And so part of my role as a minister is not just to tell you to have faith, but to actually show you an example of faith myself.

[9 : 58] The key point I want to emphasize is that a minister never, ever graduates from needing to have a childlike faith in Jesus.

It's not like the normal Christians all have a childlike faith in Jesus and the ministers graduate from that and we've got this sophisticated, fancy, super duper faith. Absolutely not through whatsoever.

We are all in that same position where we have to look to Jesus every day in total dependence on him. A minister has got to be a believer.

Minister is also a servant. Now that's really important because that's really what the word minister means. When we talk about a minister, we're talking about a servant.

That's what the word means. So you've got it here in Ephesians 7. Paul talks about him being made a minister. In Ephesians 6:21 he talks about Tychicus, also a faithful minister, Philippians he talks about Epaphroditus and as a minister and all of these words mean servant.

[11 : 06] These two words are the same in Greek. It's actually the word for deacon and this word here is a different word but it still also means the same thing. It all means servant.

To be a minister is to be a servant. So I am the servant of Carlyway Free Church. Phil is training for servanthood in the Free Church of Scotland and if a congregation becomes vacant they are looking for a new servant.

And that's incredibly important to remember because it's reminding us that a minister is not the boss and a minister is not there to control things. Jesus himself spoke about that incredibly clearly.

He said to his disciples, you know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. In other words they are just bossy, they dictate the terms, they tell everyone what to do and they exert their authority.

It shall not be so among you but whoever shall be great among you must be your servant, whoever will be first among you must be slave of all. Why?

[12 : 10] Because that's what Jesus did. The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. There is one thing that Jesus did which was a great example of leadership.

So Jesus, there is one thing that Jesus did in his ministry which he identified as the big example of what good leadership looks like in the Christian church. One specific incident that demonstrated his idea of leadership.

Do you know what it is? It's in John 13 when he washed the disciples feet. And when he did that he culminated it by saying I have given you an example.

You need to go and do just what I have done. And that's so, so important for reminding us what biblical leadership looks like. A minister is to exercise leadership but not as a boss, not as a dictator, not as an authoritarian.

He is to do it as a servant. And that's always a great question to ask of a minister. Is he serving me? Is he serving our congregation?

[13 : 22] Is he serving our community? This raises just one little point that I think is very important that I've often come across over the years.

At various times you get asked to go and preach in congregations that are vacant. You're just helping out in terms of supply. And what you quite often hear when you go there is people will say, oh, we need a minister because we need someone to come and give us a vision.

We need someone to come and lead us. We need someone to come and take things forward. And I can understand what people are saying. I do understand that sentiment.

But I wish that congregations did not think that. And I wish that congregations did not say it. I wish that congregations didn't say we need a minister to come and give us a vision.

Because that's the wrong way around. What I want to hear is a congregation saying we have got a vision. We want to reach our community.

[14 : 24] And we want a minister to come and serve here and make that vision a reality. That's the way it should be. That the congregation as a whole drives forward that vision and that the minister is just a servant being used by God to make it happen.

A minister is a servant. Third thing, minister is a sinner. This is a point that the apostle Paul makes very, very clear in his own writings.

You see it powerfully in 1 Timothy 1. Paul says this saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the foremost.

Paul saw himself as the foremost of sinners, chief of sinners is the old fashioned language for that. And then Romans 7 you have this really amazing and incredibly helpful description of Paul of the battle he faces as a Christian, as an apostle, as a minister whereby he doesn't understand his own actions.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it's no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

[15 : 43] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what's right, but not the ability to carry it out. What I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

And that's the battle faced by every single Christian. Ministers are no different.

Ministers are no different at all. We are sinners. We struggle with temptation. We make mistakes and we constantly need to guard our hearts.

And the passage that we read Paul says to Timothy, keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. And that's so crucial because it's so easy to slip into sin.

A couple of specific lessons that you need to take from this. First of all, do not think that because a minister does it, it's okay.

[16 : 49] Do not think that. And I say that especially in terms of sins like gossip or judging others or losing your temper or refusing to forgive somebody.

So easy to look at a minister who's doing those sort of things and think, oh, what if they're doing it? It must be okay. It's not okay. It's not okay. And the only standard for our behavior is scripture.

And we all, ministers or non-ministers, stand underneath that and we must seek to obey it.

So please don't ever think that because a minister does it, it must be okay. And I say that because I've made that mistake myself.

I've done that in the past, looked up to people maybe too much, seen them do things and thought, oh, okay, that must be okay. Well, the only thing that tells us if something is okay or not is God's word.

[17 : 59] So that's one lesson. Don't ever think just because a minister does it, therefore it's okay. And that's true of your current minister, ministers in the past, ministers in different places, whatever it may be.

Second crucial lesson here is you mustn't expect a minister to be perfect. You mustn't expect a minister to be perfect.

Ministers are sinners who make mistakes. So we don't get every decision right. I don't get every decision right.

I don't get every reaction right. And often there are things that ministers fail to do. And it's important that we as ministers are ready to acknowledge our mistakes.

And I think that's a really important thing to say because I think in ministry there's this huge temptation to kind of come across this, to come across in a way, to try and give the impression that you never do anything wrong.

[19 : 04] And that's not true. And it's important that we resist that temptation to never, ever, ever come across this wrong. We've got to be ready to hold our hands up and say, I wish I'd done that differently, but I wish I'd not done that at all.

This is one of the many examples where our theology can often be a million miles from our attitude. And that's a danger for all Christians, our theology can be a million miles from our attitude.

Our theology tells us that we're sinners. Our theology tells us that we will all make mistakes every day. Our theology tells us that no one is perfect. Our theology tells us that we need to repent daily.

Yet in our attitude as ministers, when do we admit that we're wrong? We're pretty much never.

Pretty much never. That's a million miles from our theology. And I think it's incredibly important that we don't do that.

[20 : 12] Couple to this is the fact that there's also sins specific to ministry. I don't think I've ever spoken about this in a sermon before, and I don't think I've ever heard a minister speak about this in a sermon before, but it's important to talk about it because there are sins specific to ministry temptations.

And there's sins specific to teaching and sins specific to parenting and sins specific to every part of life, but there's sins specific to ministry as well, which is why we don't just pray that God would do wonderful things through ministers.

We also pray that God would guard us from doing terrible things. Let me give you some examples. And I know that these examples exist because I've either done them or I've been tempted to do them.

So here's some. Jealousy. That's a very, very easy sin to fall into in ministry. So easy to just compare yourself to other preachers, to other churches, and to very quickly see them as better and to feel jealous.

I don't really know a proper word for this, but I've written, go it alone ism. That basically idea where we think we can do everything ourselves. We don't take help. We just control everything, do everything, don't delegate, and just go it alone.

[21 : 32] It's not a good idea. Bitterness. When things go wrong, when things don't work out, when you plan something, it doesn't work, you hoped for something and maybe you were let down.

Very easy for bitterness to take root in your heart. It's also very easy to fall into the sin of people pleasing. You just want people to like you and you want people to approve of everything that you're doing.

That's a sin I do struggle with a lot. And it's a very easy sin to fall into in ministry. Self-glorification is a very, very easy one to fall into where we want to make a name for ourselves.

That's easy to fall into. It's easy to fall into the sin of overwork. That's easy because you can pour yourself into work too much. It's also easy to fall into the sin of laziness because no one's watching you.

And I've seen ministers struggle in both of those directions. It's easy to fall into the sin of pride. That can happen in loads of different ways.

[22 : 36] And it's also easy, and we've seen this especially through in the church in the west in the last two or three years where ministers have misused their power and whether intentionally or not they've actually created atmospheres in their church where things have reached the point of either being close to you or in some cases actually have been an environment of bullying which is awful.

And these are just, I'm just sharing these because they exist. It's real. And I think you mustn't ever forget that your minister is one of them, a sinner.

But your minister is also an elder. And that word elder is also the word presbiter. And that's I think a very, very important thing to remember.

Lots of stuff's important to remember. First of all, to just remember that a minister is just an elder. Just an elder. And it's not like ministers here and then elders are underneath and then deacons underneath and then members underneath and then everyone else underneath.

It's not this weird pyramid with the minister at the top. That is absolutely not what we believe. That is not Presbyterianism. And it's important that we remember that, that we recognize that a minister is a presbyter, an elder.

[23 : 57] And I often think that we would find it a lot easier to understand things that if instead of being called a Presbyterian church, we were called an elder-Irian church. But that just doesn't really sound very good.

It's not very easy to say. But that's what Presbyterian means. Peter talks about this. He talks about himself as a fellow elder. That's what we all are.

In Presbyterianism, there's two important things to remember. One is parity of elders. That's coming back to what I just said a moment ago. All elders are equal. So in terms of this room right here, you've got Dole, you've got Alistair, you've got Ian, you've got me.

All elders, all equal. All absolutely equal. And that's incredibly important in terms of how we function as a church. Parity of elders is crucial.

There is, however, a distinction in our understanding of eldership between a ruling elder, those who rule and those who teach. And you can see that distinction is just hinted at here in this verse, that elders who rule will be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.

[25 : 07] So amongst elders, there are those who rule, what we call ruling elders, but then within them there are some who labour in preaching and teaching. We call them teaching elders, also known as ministers.

That's my job. I'm a teaching elder. So all of that's helpful because it reminds us that when we look at the qualifications for eldership, in Timothy here, when we say that they have to be above reproach, husband of one wife, sober minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money, these are the qualifications for ministry.

And if I am quarrelsome, if I love money, if I lack self-control, I'm not qualified for my job.

That's what the Bible expects of us. A minister is an elder. Minister is also a preacher. That's really one of the primary roles that we have, along with prayer, preaching is primary in terms of what we should be doing.

We see that in many places in the New Testament. Paul exhorts Timothy, preach the word, he says. Paul speaks about how he preached Christ and he has been given the incredible privilege of preaching the unsearchable riches of our Saviour.

[26 : 43] As preachers, we are heralds. That means we're speaking on behalf of another. We're communicating God's message, not our own. And as preachers, we are bringers of good news.

And that's such an incredibly important thing. When you see that word, preach in Scripture, it is preaching good news, not depressing, awful, rubbish, miserable news, good news, good news that transforms the lives of all who come to Jesus.

And that's why a key part of my job is to prepare and deliver a regular, consistent diet of good preaching to our congregation.

That's what a minister is supposed to do. And we must never forget that that's the means that God has used to change the world for a church to thrive.

God's word must be preached. Alongside that, a minister is also a pastor teacher. Now, this comes from Ephesians chapter 4. Paul writes that Christ gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the shepherds and teachers.

[27 : 51] Now, that phrase there, shepherds or pastors, the word pastor just means shepherd, there's an important construction in the Greek language to see there that in all these words, the appears in front of all of us.

The apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, but then it doesn't say the shepherds and the teachers, it says the shepherds and teachers.

And because there's just the one the along that last section, we recognize that Paul is talking about shepherd teacher as one combined role, a pastor teacher.

That's what a minister is. And those two roles are crucial, a shepherd, a pastor cares for his flock, feeds them, guides them, looks after them.

That's a massive part of what a minister should be doing. But at the same time, a minister also needs to be teaching them. And that makes perfect sense because the flock is made up of disciples.

[28 : 53] Disciples are learners, that's what the word disciple means. And so in order for them to be shepherded and cared for, the learners need to be taught. A minister is a pastor teacher.

Now this is interesting because I'm just going to share a sort of personal thing at the moment. Over the years it's been said to me, you are a teacher, not a preacher.

You're a teacher, not a preacher. And I know what the people who've said that to me mean because I love scribbling on a piece of paper and I love teaching all that kind of stuff. And I know what they mean, but I do want to say that that distinction between a preacher and a teacher is not one that the New Testament recognizes.

The New Testament would say, a minister is a preacher and a teacher, you never divide the two. A minister has got to teach his people.

A shepherd teacher, a pastor teacher has got to teach the disciples. That is how they will grow. Now if you wanted to make a distinction between an evangelist and a teacher, I would be happy to accept that distinction because it exists in scripture, but not the distinction between a preacher and a teacher because the two are a key part of the work of a minister.

[30 : 17] Interestingly all of this has a purpose. The role of the pastor teacher has a great purpose and it's outlined for us here to equip the saints for works of ministry.

Now there's an interesting phrase, ministers are to equip the saints to be ministering.

And that's a great reminder that the work of the church is something that we all share in together. We all share in it together and a key part of my role is to equip and to help and encourage you all to go out into this week and to minister to people in your homes and in your jobs and in your community to be a blessing and to share the good news, to show generosity and help to the poor, to encourage those who are weak and faint hearted and to bring the good news to people who desperately need to hear it.

Never ever ever think that the work of ministry is just for ministers. Ministers are to equip everyone for the wonderful work of ministry that God has given to us.

So a minister is a believer, a servant, a sinner, an elder, a preacher, a pastor teacher, last of all they are a brother. I love the way when Paul speaks about Techicus here, he talks about him as a faithful minister and a beloved brother.

[31 : 42] And that's an incredibly important reminder that we are brothers and sisters together. I used to think that ministers were this kind of unique category of super special people and I thought that they were kind of like just better and wiser and cleverer and just better in every way.

Then I became one and I realized that that whole category doesn't exist at all. And we are just brothers and sisters together.

We are a family. Your minister is your brother. He's not way up there six feet above contradiction. He is in need of your love and friendship and he's in need of the support of your family as he supports you as his family.

We are just in this together as brothers and sisters. The minister is not the hero. He's never the hero. The only hero is Jesus.

So all these things are through of minister. These are the words that you should think of when you hear the word minister. That they're a believer, a servant, a sinner, an elder, a preacher, a pastor, teacher, a brother.

[32 : 55] I want to close by asking a final question very briefly. What's it like being a minister? What's it like being a minister?

Well, I'm going to say three things. It's challenging, but I mean that in a good way. I absolutely love my job.

It is just a brilliant job. It's a busy job. It's a challenging job. I have to think hard and work hard. And sometimes I think to myself, I can't do this. I'm not capable.

It's challenging, but that's just, that makes it brilliant. It's such a privilege and a joy. It's a very, very stimulating, exciting job in that sense.

It's worrying because I want you all to put your faith in Jesus.

[33 : 59] And I want you all to profess faith in Jesus, and I want you all to tell others about Jesus.

And I'm so, so thankful to God for all of those who have. But those of you who haven't yet, I worry that you won't.

And I want you to know how much we love you, how much I love you, and how much Jesus loves you, and how simple he just is holding out his hands to you.

And some of you I know are believers and you're waiting for a flash of lightning that doesn't need to come. He's just saying, look, just follow me. I'll help you every step of the way. And some of you maybe are not quite sure where you stand before Jesus.

And again, he's just holding out his hands to you, and all he's asking for is a child-like faith. I don't want you to stay where you are.

[35 : 06] I want you to take that next step and follow Jesus. So being a minister is challenging. Being a minister is worrying. But do you know what most of all it is?

You knew you were going to say that word, didn't you? That's my favourite word. It's flitting amazing. It's just amazing to be able to study God's word, to be able to come to you each week, to proclaim God's word, to see God working in our community, and to be able to serve alongside incredible people like you as we go on together to tell our community and to show our community how absolutely wonderful Jesus is.

It's just amazing. And together, he can do amazing things through us. Amen.