

PROFESSIONALISM IS TO BE WELCOMED

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Some years ago I wrote a blog with the title, 'Ministers' resistance against professionalism puzzles me'¹. It began:

“The other day I was with four other ministers when one of them raised the issue of professionalization in ministry. To my utter amazement two of the ministers almost hit the roof as they vehemently decried such a concept. For them the idea of being a professional was anathema.

As far as they were concerned, they were accountable to God, and to God alone. They would certainly not be willing to be accountable to a professional body which might have expectations in terms of continuing ministerial development. And as for having to go through an appraisal process which might make them accountable to a group of deacons or elders, they would rather resign from ministry.”

Seven years later, I sense there is still a resistance. If anything amongst some Baptist church leaders, ministry has become less professional. Furthermore, the concept of accountability to the church is dismissed on the grounds that in British law ministers are regarded as office holders rather than as employees. By virtue of their ordination they work for God rather than for the church. In the first place they are accountable to God, rather than to the church: they therefore cannot sue the church for unfair dismissal. Ministers when responding to a call to a church do not enter into a contract with the church; rather they simply receive a letter of appointment.

At many of the CBM early roadshows I went round the country banging the professionalism 'drum'. At the time I was unaware of the Church of England's *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy*,² which concludes with some helpful theological reflections by Francis Bridger on the nature of ministry – and of a professional ministry at that. Let me quote from that document:³

‘Profession’ in a clergy context must be seen as possessing not one meaning but two: on the one hand to describe the sociological reality of a group of people who operate according to conventions and practices developed by the group; and on the other, as an indication that this group stands for – professes – a set of transcendent values and principles which derive from a theology of vocation. Both senses of the term profession must be kept in mind

From the principle of vocation follows the question: a vocation to what? The most obvious answer is ‘to serve’. But to serve whom? Theologically, service is firstly towards God and only secondly towards human beings. Moreover such service is only possible through relationships. This in turn requires the teasing out of a cluster

¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, Ministers resistance against professionalism puzzles me, *Church Matters* 25 April 2013

² *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy* (Church House, London revised edition 2015).

³ Francis Bridger. ‘A concluding theological reflection’, *Guidelines*, 26-27.

of concepts that shape the notions of relationship and relationality, and at the centre of this cluster lies the idea of covenant.

The concept of covenant represents the wellspring from which a theology of professional responsibility flows. Its significance can be demonstrated by contrasting it with the concept that governs secular models of professional relationship, namely that of contract. ... The two are close cousins, but there are crucial differences. Contracts define the specific nature of the relationship and the precise rights and duties that follow it. Neither party can expect the other to go beyond the specified contractual duties, and each has the liberty to refuse requests to do so. Indeed, the expectation is that such requests will not be made or granted except *in extremis*... By contrast, the biblical model of covenant – exemplified most powerfully by the covenant relationship between God and his people, is based on grace. The covenant partners are bound together not by a set of legal requirements but by the relational nexus of gracious initiative followed by thankful response. Covenant goes further than the carefully defined obligations contained within a contract to the need for further actions that might be required by love. “When we act according to a covenant, we look beyond the minimum... Partners in a covenant are willing to go the extra miles to make things work out (Richard Gula, 15).

It is this graciousness – the readiness “to make room for the gratuitous, not just the gratuities” (Gula 15) – that distinguishes covenant from contract and gives ministry its distinctive quality. Rooted in the covenant love of God, the covenantal ministry of clergy mirrors that of Christ himself who gave himself freely for the sake of the world and “who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2.6-7). The covenant model is, in the end, profoundly Christological.

The implication of this is that those who are called to ordained ministry must act out of a covenantal rather than a contractual motivation and mindset. They must be “willing to go the extra mile”, which means that they must be prepared to allow their ministry to be shaped by the needs of others rather than their own preconceptions of autonomy.

For Baptists this language of ‘covenant’ fits in well with our ecclesiology. For instance, John Smyth, one of the first Baptist church leaders, defined a “visible community of saints” as “two or more joined together in covenant with God and themselves”. In recent years there has been an increasing recognition among Baptists of the need to rediscover their roots and realise afresh that in becoming church members, we enter into a covenant’ which involves ‘covenant relationships’. So when welcoming new church members I would say: “In a Baptist church, membership involves entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with one another – a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ’s Kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another whatever the cost”.⁴

⁴ See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Radical Believers: The Baptist way of being the church* (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 2nd edition 2006) 72-76.

Ministers of local churches are part of that covenant, for they too are church members. However, ministers are also part of another covenant relationship made between the minister and the church at the time of the minister's induction. For from a theological perspective at the heart of an induction is an act of covenant between the church and its new minister. This comes to explicit recognition in the latest British Baptist 'service' book, *Gathering for Worship*, where there is 'A covenant pattern of induction' in which the church and minister promise faithfulness to one another.⁵

Minister and church are not just accountable to God, they are also accountable to one another. In this regard let me draw your attention to some reflections of Scottish Baptist minister Catriona Gorton:⁶

"Induction services are sometimes compared with marriage ceremonies – happy occasions when we delight in new beginnings and within which we make solemn vows designed to help us fulfil our commitments one to the other whatever life brings. They are, whatever form of words we choose to employ, covenant making services: minister and church each pledging to each other, and before God, their commitment. With each of the churches I've served, I have made a point, at or around the anniversary of the induction, to revisit some aspect of those promises and, usually, to renew the covenant. Just like marriage, church-minister relationships needed to be tended in order to thrive.

This understanding of covenant informed my approach to a challenging time shared with my first pastorate, when they were forced to give me notice as they could no longer afford to pay me: as well as a 'Covenant for Troubled Times,' which we used at the start of the notice period, I created a liturgy for 'release of covenant' which we used at our final service together. This allowed us to recognise and release the disappointments and failings on each side, and to celebrate all that had been good and Godly along the way. Importantly it gave us a sense of emotional and spiritual closure: this was no ugly 'divorce', nor was I abandoning them, rather we continued to value and affirm each other in the parting of the ways.

Covenant for me is a vibrant expression of the oft cited 'priesthood of all believers' – once explained to me as 'I'll be your priest and you'll be mine, we'll each be each other's'. Covenant means sticking together whatever life throws at us: it means weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice; it means that you are permitted to hold me accountable and I to challenge you. Covenant informs every aspect of church life, whether it is sharing communion with elderly house-bound folk, arranging rotas to make the after-service refreshments or making huge decisions to sell or redevelop premises (each of which have arisen in both my pastorates!)

⁵ See Christopher Ellis & Myra Blyth (eds), *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Baptist Union of Great Britain – published by Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) 140-143.

⁶ Catriona Gorton, 'Thoughts on Covenant', *Baptists Together Magazine* Spring 2016

For me professional ministry is about giving of my best to both God and his people – and thereby fulfilling my covenant obligations to both God. For me there is nothing cold and unspiritual about seeking to be professional – rather my professionalism is an expression of love of and passion for Jesus Christ and his church. Or as Derek Tidball once wrote in the context of preaching: “God is no more honoured by our bumbling amateurism than he is honoured by a shallow professionalism. He is worthy of servants who reach high standards, who display competence and produce quality work, not slapdash work, as they serve him”.⁷

Or as Jesus once said: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” (Luke 12.48). In other words, there is no place in ministry for us flying by the seat of our pants! Those who decry professionalism run the risk of endorsing mediocrity rather than excellence, sloppiness rather than carefulness, laziness rather than industry, the second-best rather than the best. Professionals, in the right sense of the word, are those who want to give their very best to God.

⁷ Derek Tidball, *Preacher, Keep Yourself From Idols* (IVP, Nottingham 2011) 178