

# The Reverend Gregory R. Morisse

## *Pastor and Teacher*

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The Four Verses of Jesus:  
An exploration of the faces of Jesus  
and their impact on the pastor-congregation relationship

### **The Gospels of Jesus Christ**

The Christian Testament has four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each gospel writer makes a case for Jesus. They do so from different perspectives, for different reasons and as a result come to very different conclusions.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are considered “synoptic gospels” because they all look a lot alike. (The term “synoptic” has well-known roots. *Syn* means similar, as in the word “synonym;” *optic* refers to vision or appearance, as in the word “optical.”)

Why do three gospels appear so similar? While the Jesus story was likely told by many, it was the next generation that sought to write it down. Mark was first between 60-70 CE. Matthew was written between 80-90 CE; Luke was written between 75-90 CE. Scholars widely agree that Matthew and Luke each had a copy of Mark when they wrote their testimonies. The Gospel of Mark can actually be found imbedded in both Luke and Matthew. We can assume this is because they valued Mark’s version, and they felt compelled to make some additions. Matthew and Luke added their own material and perspective to flesh out the story.

In fact, Luke’s gospel is only the first half of a two-part version! The Gospel of Luke is chapter one; chapter two is the Acts of the Apostles. It is one of the great tragedies of the biblical canon that Luke and Acts have been separated by John!

John’s gospel does not share the same origins as the synoptic gospels. Written between 80-90 CE, John offers a markedly different take on the story of Jesus, both in style and content.

### **Who is Jesus?**

In the ancient world, for a thing to have value it had to be old. Anything “new” was dismissed as irrelevant. Thus, from the very beginning of his ministry people sought to place Jesus into a historical box.

Luke demonstrates this in a brief exchange between Jesus and his students.

*Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” They answered, “John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.” Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “The Messiah of God.” (Luke 9:18-20)*

The crowds attempt to link Jesus with meaningful historical figures from recent and distant past. The disciples want to embed Jesus into the Messiah narrative.

For the purpose of this paper, I do not wish to tell you who Jesus was or wasn't, who Jesus is or isn't. I consider it a gift that the Christian tradition brings us four versions of Jesus. Each person gets to make up their own mind. Each person gets to discover their own relationship with the Divine Mystery. What I hope to expose is the bias of each gospel. Bias in the sense that each version of the story reflects the hopes and fears of real people and their inspiration. I do not believe these four versions necessarily *contradict* each other. But they are *different*.

This is most evident in the nativity narratives.

In the Gospel of Mark, there is no nativity. Mark begins with Jesus and John the Baptist on the banks of the Jordan River. Mark does not care how Jesus was born or from where, only that he is here, now! I find an urgency to Mark's gospel. The stories are shorter and rougher; stories are left unresolved.

In the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke we find two very different nativity stories. How Jesus was born mattered to Matthew and Luke. Matthew tells us of wealthy scholars who visit Jesus in a house. Luke tells us of outcast shepherds who visit Jesus in a stable. Both authors take their time to retell Mark's version of the Jesus story through these particular lenses.

In the Gospel of John, there is no nativity in the literal sense. John does, however, spend considerable effort to reveal Jesus' "origin story." No shepherds, no magi. John goes back to the very beginning of Creation.

Next, I will uncover the motivating agenda for Matthew, Luke and John.

## **The Gospel of Matthew**

Let's look at the opening section headings for the Gospel of Matthew.

- The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah
- The Birth of Jesus the Messiah
- The Visit of the Wise Men
- The Escape to Egypt
- The Massacre of the Infants
- The Return from Egypt
- The Proclamation of John the Baptist
- The Baptism of Jesus
- The Temptation of Jesus

### *The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah*

"An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). The opening verse of Matthew immediately identifies Jesus as the Messiah. Matthew connects Jesus to the ancestry of the patriarch Abraham with whom God covenanted to make a great nation and promised a land flowing with milk and honey. And Matthew connects Jesus to David the strongest and most prosperous king to rule over that land. The rest of that section is a list of the generations, proof of Jesus' royal birthright.

While Joseph wasn't the biological father, Jesus' adoption by Joseph is as strong a connection as paternity. The Hebrew Scriptures contain a strong theme of *adoption* and *redemption* in which the most unlikely character is chosen by God. Jacob (later renamed Israel) stole his older brother's birthright. Moses, the stuttering murderer, was raised in the courts of Pharaoh. David was the youngest (and therefore least valued) son, and a shepherd!

### *The Birth of Jesus the Messiah / The Visit of the Wise Men*

In the next section, Jesus is born. Matthew does not tell us exactly when the wise men—or magi—found Jesus. Tradition holds they arrived twelve days later.

Note that in Matthew, there is no census, no long journey for Mary and Joseph. And no manger; the magi find Jesus in a *house*. “On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother” (Matt. 2:11). The magi were powerful and wealthy men, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh—kingly gifts. In Matthew there is no indication that Jesus had a ‘lowly birth.’

### *The Escape to Egypt / The Massacre of the Infants / The Return from Egypt*

In the next section, Jesus, Mary and Joseph flee the wrath of Herod, escaping to Egypt. Herod, having been tricked by the noble magi, orders a slaughter of all male children under the age of two years. When Herod dies, Jesus returns from Egypt.

Does that sound familiar? It's a parallel narrative to that of Moses and the Exodus story. “The King of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives... ‘When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live’” (Exodus 1:15-16). It is by this command that Moses is separated from his birth family and raised in the courts of Pharaoh.

Just as the whole of Israel was freed from slavery, leaving Egypt, Jesus, Mary and Joseph leave Egypt and make their way to Judea. However, just as when Israel came upon the Red Sea, their way was blocked, so was the path of Jesus. Herod's son Archelaus presents a threat to Jesus, so rather than return to Bethlehem, Jesus must make a new home in the outskirts of Nazareth.

### *The Proclamation of John the Baptist / The Baptism of Jesus*

After paralleling the first five books of Moses (the Torah) Matthew jumps thirty years ahead to John the Baptist, a strange man who baptized people in the river Jordan.

The Jordan River was the final crossing for the people of Israel from their forty-year journey in the desert into the Promised Land. On the banks of the Jordan River Moses passed the mantle of leadership onto his brother Aaron.

Jesus comes to the river in order to be baptized by his cousin. “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were parted and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (Matt. 3:16). Just as waters were once parted for the Israel, the chosen people, the heavens were parted for Jesus, the Christ.

### *The Temptation of Jesus*

If Matthew's audience did not get it yet, after the parting of the heavens, Jesus was immediately led into the wilderness for forty days. The Israelites wandered for forty years in the wilderness.

*Who is Matthew saying that Jesus is?*

Matthew is making a claim that Jesus is the new Moses, who brought God's people from slavery to the Promised Land. Matthew also argues that Jesus is a new King David. To sum up: Jesus is born ready to rule. Jesus is the leader who will guide God's people to the Promised Land, the king who will reign on high insuring national security.

## **The Gospel of Luke**

Let's look at the opening section headings in the Gospel of Luke.

- Dedication to Theophilus
- The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold
- The Birth of Jesus Foretold
- (Mary visits Elizabeth)
- (Mary's Song of Praise)
- (The Birth of John the Baptist)
- Zechariah's Prophecy
- The Birth of Jesus
- The Shepherds and the Angels
- Jesus is Named
- Jesus is Presented in the Temple
- ...
- The Baptism of Jesus
- The Ancestors of Jesus
- (The Temptation of Jesus)
- (The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry)
- The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

### *Dedication to Theophilus*

The Gospel of Luke begins with a dedication to some man named Theophilus. "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that *have been fulfilled among us*, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and *servants of the word...*" (Luke 1:1-2, emphasis added). A meek beginning to a very unmeek story.

*The Birth of John the Baptist Foretold / The Birth of Jesus Foretold*  
*(Mary visits Elizabeth / Mary's Song of Praise / The Birth of John the Baptist)*  
*Zechariah's Prophecy*

The following two sections describe the foretelling of John the Baptist and Jesus. Mary visits Elizabeth. Mary sings a song. Not a lullaby, but a song of protest. The powerful brought down from their thrones, the rich sent away empty. Spicy stuff.

John is born. Then, John's father, Zechariah speaks another bold prophecy concerning John and Jesus. Early on in this version, we get the sense that the story has been *predicted*. Jesus is the *culmination* of something that has been moving in this direction for a long time.

### *The Birth of Jesus*

It is in Luke's gospel that Mary and Joseph are forced to travel on a donkey to Bethlehem. This fulfills the prophecy that the Messiah would be born there. "But you, Bethlehem in Ephratha, though you are least among the clans of Judah, out of you will come one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:1). In this version, Jesus' parents are outcast and homeless. Finding no room at the inn, Mary gives birth in a lowly stable. No fancy clothes for Jesus, just bands of cloth.

### *The Shepherds and the Angels*

Once Jesus has been born, angels announce his birth, not to wise and wealthy magi but to lowly outcast shepherds. In the Jewish tradition, shepherds were on the outer edge of society, not only because of the nomadic demands of raising sheep, but also because close contact with the animals made the men unclean.

### *Jesus is Named / Jesus is Presented in the Temple*

Eight days after his birth, Jesus is named—just as any Jewish baby would be and still is. In the Temple, we meet Simeon: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26). We also meet the prophet Anna, who "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the *redemption* of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38, emphasis added).

### *The Baptism of Jesus / The Temptation of Jesus*

Just as in Matthew, John the Baptist proclaims the need for repentance and Jesus is thus baptized. Shortly after, he is then led into the wilderness and tempted by the devil.

### *The Ancestors of Jesus*

Sandwiched between Jesus' baptism and his journey into the wilderness, Luke offers us a genealogy of Jesus—much later than in Matthew. While Matthew begins with Abraham and works his way to David, then to Jesus, Luke begins with Jesus and works all the way to Adam! Abraham and David are mentioned, but no special attention is drawn to either; they are simply one of many fathers along the way.

### *The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry / The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth*

Finally, when Jesus is a young adult and ready to begin his ministry, he is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and reads what can be considered his manifesto:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

#### *Who is Luke saying that Jesus is?*

Luke is making a claim that Jesus is a prophet; he is, in fact, the fulfillment of all prophecy up to this point. The separation that began with Adam's expulsion from Eden can be repaired by the redeeming work of Jesus. Luke does not make any claim to Jesus' sovereignty; his authority rests in his being the completion of God's desires for Israel.

The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures is vast and unique in history. A formative standard for Israel was that of *shalom*—wholeness. "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry" (Exodus 22:21-23). Remembering the experience of having been enslaved in Egypt and freed from that bondage by the mercy of the LORD, the Jewish project was not about security or wealth, but about peace with justice. Inevitably, as most communities do, they fell short. Judges and kings became distracted by the allure of power and might; the people neglected their worship and drifted into aimlessness and sin. Whenever Israel strayed, God sent a prophet to speak against the powers, calling the peoples back to God.

Jesus is sent as a prophet, from common stock, to call the nations back to God. The message of this good news is not announced to magi, but to shepherds; it is not preached in Jerusalem the center, but in Nazareth the outskirts. Jesus is not born to rule, as in Matthew, but matures to become the one Israel needs most.

#### **The Gospel of John**

Let's look at the opening section headings in the Gospel of John.

The Word Became Flesh  
The Testimony of John the Baptist  
The Lamb of God  
The First Disciples of Jesus  
Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael  
The Wedding at Cana  
Jesus Cleanses the Temple

#### *The Word Became Flesh*

In the Gospel of John, there is no nativity. But, unlike Mark's lack of a nativity, John does begin his gospel by identifying the origins of Jesus in order to establish his authority, purpose and location. Note the similarity between Genesis...

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-3)

...and John’s prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

In Genesis, God creates the world from nothing; the very first act of creation is light. John makes the claim that Jesus *is* that light, through which all creation and life comes from. John does not believe that Jesus reigns over Israel or is sent to call Israel back to God; John believes that Jesus *is* God.

### *Wisdom*

This famous prologue of John’s gospel, unbeknownst to many today, is also invoking another tradition—that of wisdom. In Proverbs we are introduced to Wisdom as a female co-creator.

The Lord by wisdom founded the earth;  
by understanding he established the heavens;  
by his knowledge the deeps broke open,  
and the clouds drop down the dew. (Proverbs 3:19-20)

The two phrases “by understanding [God] established” and “by [God’s] knowledge,” mirror John’s “All things came into being through him.”

There is a poem, commonly known in antiquity, which employed a nearly identical structure of John’s prologue. Except the poem posits, “In the beginning was *Wisdom*...” The Greek word for ‘wisdom’ is *sophia*, which is a gender-feminine noun. Thus, “*She* was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through *her*, and without *her* not one thing came into being.”

Jesus, however, was not a woman. John cleverly adapts this popular poem, exchanging *sophia* for *logos*—the Word. John invokes not only the creation narrative, but also the wisdom tradition to argue Jesus’ *foundational* being, his preeminence in the created order.

(I have to find a citation for this, because honestly,  
I cannot remember which class taught this to me  
or which book I read it in.)

### *The Testimony of John the Baptist / The Lamb of God*

As in the synoptic gospels, John the Baptist recognizes Jesus as someone significant (cf. Matthew 3:11-14; Luke 3:15-17). John's gospel is the only one in which John identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

Once more, the Exodus narrative so much a part of the Jewish consciousness is conjured. The final plague that killed all firstborn sons in Egypt passed over the homes with the blood of a sacrificial lamb smeared on the door. Matthew argues that Jesus is Moses, a son of Israel spared from the massacre. John set Jesus up *to be the sacrifice*. Jesus dies. It is his blood, smeared the doorways and homes of God's people, that saves them from the plague of death.

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is presented in the temple, he is as any other Jew. He is in need of the same purification rites as his parents. He is subject to the same laws. John's version of Jesus is categorically different. Jesus stands outside the ritualistic tradition. The Lamb of God is special and pure, in order for the sacrifice to be acceptable to God. Modern evaluations of Jesus as blameless and without sin are sourced almost exclusively from John's articulation of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice.

### *The First Disciples of Jesus / Jesus Calls Philip and Nathanael*

Immediately following his baptism, Jesus begins gathering his disciples. John (the disciple), like John (the Baptist), having never seen Jesus before, identifies him as the Lamb of God (John 1:36). In these two sections, Jesus is also referred to as Rabbi (or Teacher), Son of God and King of Israel.

As John's gospel is the last transcribed, I wonder: could this be an attempt to achieve credibility in the eyes of Mark's, Luke's and Matthew's audiences (respectively)?

### *The Wedding at Cana*

In the second chapter of the Gospel of John, having barely introduced the characters, Jesus is already seen at work. While enjoying the party at the wedding in Cana, the host family suddenly runs out of wine! The tradition of hospitality being so important in Jewish culture, this is a travesty of great proportion. Fear not, Jesus readily and willingly displays his divine power. Not wanting the host family embarrassed—or, possibly his buzz to fade—Jesus orders barrels filled with water. The water is then turned into the finest wine!

Contrast John's depiction of Jesus boldly displaying his "magic" to Mark's version in which Jesus orders the leper not to tell anyone about Jesus' "powers" (Mark 1:43-44).

### *Jesus Cleanses the Temple*

After the wedding, Jesus, like many Jews of his day, travels to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. (Again, the Exodus motif is being presented.) While at the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus finds "people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the Temple" (John 2:14-15).



In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus does not enter the temple until the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter (of 28). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus does not enter the temple until the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter (of 24). In Mark, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter (of 16). In the synoptic tradition, Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem and his cleansing of the Temple are key pieces of the indictment which leads to his crucifixion. It is this rabble-rousing that convinces Herod and the Roman authorities that Jesus is trouble. John (the gospel-writer), however, wastes no time in placing Jesus in the heartland of Judea, the center of God's holy city, at the very *home of the LORD*.

In the synoptic tradition, Jesus does not fashion himself a whip. Only in the Gospel of John, does Jesus *violently* toss out the money changers.

John (the gospel writer), both by the miracle of water into wine and the manner in which he cleanses the Temple, seems to be saying that Jesus has power and isn't afraid to use it. His death is already set. It is unavoidable. In fact, it is his sacrifice that is the very *purpose* of his visit to earth. So, no need to worry about upsetting the powers that be.

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple—"not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown."—(Matthew 24:24, Mark 13:2, Luke 21:6). Scholars interpret this as evidence that the gospels were written after 70 CE. Historians can verify that The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by a Roman invasion in the year 70 CE. Scholars assume the gospel writers have Jesus making this claim that the Temple would be destroyed as proof of Christ's foresight.

I'm inclined to consider that maybe Jesus really *did* say it. Given the rising political tensions between Rome and Israel it was bound to happen.

In the Gospel of John, however, the foretelling of the Temple's destruction has a twist. "The Jews then said to Jesus, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'" (John 18-19). This simultaneously makes Jesus look incredibly powerful and serves as a poetic reference not to the temple of stone, but of his own body. (This is what I call good story-telling.) John foreshadows the crucifixion. No wonder a generation later people still memorized and retold his version! *Who is John saying that Jesus is?*

Jesus is the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice through which Israel is reconciled to God. It is with this in mind that when Martha is grieving the death of her brother Lazarus Jesus reassures her saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

## Overview

With the exception of Mark, who can't be bothered with much other than the bare-boned facts, the other three gospel writers advocate Jesus through a particular lens. Matthew believes that Jesus is a new Moses and a new David; he will lead the people. Luke believes that Jesus is a prophet and the fulfillment of all prophecy; he will challenge the people is the embodied hope of God. John believes that Jesus is God, the living sacrifice by which humanity and God are forever reconciled.

I don't want you to think I am unearthing some great and never-before-known discovery. This article is in great measure my attempt to make sense of the

scholarship of others. (And, yes, I should really be citing them, which I would do if I could remember who they are!)

The early Christians understood that these four versions were different. In a stroke of genius they did not feel the need to re-write a single narrative or tie up every loose end. Blessedly, they did not merge the gospels into one Frankenstein-like book. (Interestingly, this is exactly what occurred in the creation of the Torah; see [\*Who Wrote the Bible\*](#), by Richard Elliott Friedman.) I suspect the early scholars relished the complexity and confusion four different takes on Jesus presented.

Not convinced? Let's examine the words to the popular Advent hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel*. This hymn is probably the oldest in the modern church's repertoire, originally composed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

*O come, O come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear*

The first verse invokes Matthew's perspective, naming Jesus Emmanuel. Matthew is the only gospel writer to invoke Isaiah 7:14. Jesus is the leader who ends Israel's captivity in Egypt and also later exiles from Jerusalem by the Babylonian and Roman empires.

*O come, Thou Day-spring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

The second verse expresses Mark's eager optimism. Mark's opening line exposes his bias: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." (The word "gospel" literally means "good news.") Mark's gospel is laced with imagery of demons and casts Jesus frequently as the exorcist. In life and in resurrection, Jesus has power over the lurking shadows.

*O come, thou Wisdom from on high,  
Who orders all things far and nigh;  
To us the path of knowledge show,  
And teach us in her ways to go.*

The third verse invokes John's perspective curiously casting Jesus as Wisdom (*Sophia*)—not the Word. "She" is the path of knowledge, and teaches us in *her* ways. Further, Jesus/Wisdom plays role in the creation—ordering all things far and nigh.

*O come, Desire of nations, bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind;  
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease,*

*Fill the whole world with heaven's peace.*

The fourth verse invokes Luke's perspective, identifying Jesus as "Desire." In this context, the *desire* of the nations refers to the wholeness toward which the prophet directs the nations. The "envy, strife and quarrels" of a broken nation are the chief indictment of the prophet, the obstacles to reconciliation with the Creator. The hope of the prophet is that a swift return to God and repentance of sin will restore the fortunes of God's people—i.e. heaven's peace.

### **The Impact**

Given the presence of *at least* three biblically sound interpretations of who Jesus is, what do we do? Are they mutually exclusive? What impact do these traditions have on us? How does this inform our relationship with Jesus? Should this change our approach to faith and church?

How does this impact the relationship between pastor and congregation? In the reformed tradition, these three articulations of Jesus are the source of the three ministerial roles, which constantly overlap and interweave—that of pastor, prophet and priest.

### *Jesus as King/King/Pastoral*

Over time, modern theorists and the American revolutionists have altered our conceptualization of the monarchy from that of the ancient world. The king was not always viewed as a tyrant who grasped for power and conquest. While many monarchs have been tyrants, it has always been understood that they were in error. A proper king or queen was responsible for the people. The monarch's position depended on his or her ability to insure the safety and security of her people. To posit that Jesus was a King was to suggest his protection, advocacy and devotion to humanity.

From this we inherit the understanding of the ordained minister as a *pastor*. The pastoral role is one of caring, of council and of service. Pastor also has etymological roots in Latin to shepherd. John may have seen Jesus as a lamb; Matthew saw Jesus as a step above King David, who himself was found tending the flocks of his family.

### *Jesus as Prophet/God/Prophet*

The prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures is filled with bold indictments of the people of Israel. God rarely dispatched a prophet to indict a foreign nation. Prophecy is about calling one's own clan back to the holy path. When Jesus first preached in his hometown of Nazareth, his prophetic message—one of justice and liberation—was so unsettling to the people, they attempted to throw him off a cliff!! Jesus definitely had a prophetic edge to his ministry.

From this, we expect the ordained minister to be a *prophet*. The prophetic role speaks to the justice issues and social concerns of the day. Prophetic ministry should upset people. It is the job of the prophet to say the hard truth that the community would otherwise just assume ignore. I don't believe clergy should endorse candidates or use the ministerial role to assert a political party's agenda. However, clergy have a

prophetic responsibility to reflect on the social welfare and well-being of the community, which can often be construed as “political.”

### *Jesus as the Lamb of God/Sacrifice/Priest*

In the ancient Temple tradition, sin was pardoned by the penitent offering of a sacrifice. A dove or calf, for example, would then be given to a Temple priest to sacrifice. Jesus cleansed the temple, in part to contend that sacrifices were no longer required by God. (See Micah 6:6-8.) John cast Jesus as the living sacrifice. He is, thus, the highest priest, giving us direct access to the Divine Creator.

Mercifully, we’ve moved on from antiquated understanding of animal sacrifice. Still, the human priestly role continues. In the Roman Catholic tradition, a simplistic interpretation would describe the priest as the conduit to God. The Protestant reformers rejected that notion, claiming every person can speak to God directly. In essence, all believers are priests. Yet, even with this understanding, the ordained minister does frequently occupy a priestly role. There are the sacramental moments of the church—baptism and communion; and sacramental moments of life—birth, trauma, catastrophe and death. These “thin moments” invite a special kind of presence and reverence.

### **The Minister of Today**

Today, the job description of an ordained minister has grown beyond “pastor, prophet and priest.” Most congregations expect their clergy to act additionally as chief executive, administrator, investment analyst, counselor, academic and evangelist! In many New England churches, it helps if the pastor can wield a glue gun and work a potluck buffet line! Further, not only are the expectations of skills broader, but the same high level of proficiency and excellence is demanded. Interestingly, even as the expectations increase, the title of the minister is often reduced to just ‘pastor’ (for Protestants) or ‘priest’ (for Catholics, Episcopalians and Orthodox).

Consider medicine. Once upon a time there was a town doctor. He (it was usually a he, back then) came to your house or maybe had an office in his home. If you broke your leg, if you had a sore throat, if you were pregnant, if you were old, if you were young, you went to the same doctor.

Today, medicine has become specialized—doctors, nurses, therapists, technicians; oncology, cardiology, immunology, psychology and on and on. We understand as the science grows that our healing should be in the hands of someone who has mastery and knowledge in the particular area of our disease. There are a few specializations emerging in ministry--transitional ministry, redevelopment ministry, and a growing sense that some small churches may a collective version of hospice ministry.

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, he lists a number of important ‘spiritual gifts’—“wise counsel, clear understanding, simple trust, healing the sick, miraculous acts, proclamation, distinguishing between spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues” (1 Corin. 12:8-10, *The Message*). Paul contends that each of these gifts comes from the one Spirit of Christ, activated in each person by that same Spirit.

Toward the end of that chapter, Paul urges the community of Corinth away from uniformity. “And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues” (1 Corin. 12:28). The church is in need of many people for many roles.

With the many gifts of the spirit, Paul understands that just as the church cannot survive as one thing and no one person can be all things at once. It is in this chapter that Paul offers us the image of the church as a body. The body can’t be all nose or all mouth; neither can the eye also be the legs, lungs, elbows, ears, *et cetera*. Paul lists each gift and its corresponding role in part to remind and convince us of the need for and power of community. In order to benefit from all that God grants humanity, we must bind ourselves together in covenant; we must become the Body of Christ.

In our culture today, we must accept that superheroes live only in comic books; rock stars and sports champions are mortal like the rest of us. And while we might wish the pastor could meet every church member’s, it is unwise to hope for this. Often the average person—pastor and parishioner alike—is not always aware of what his or her needs are! While Jesus may have supernaturally understood the needs of people, as he did the woman at the well, that particular skill, if he even taught it to the disciples, has been lost to history. The pastoral role is *derived* from the work and witness of Jesus Christ; it does not mirror it.

Where do we go from here? How can we modify congregational expectations? How can clergy navigate the tricky waters between need and want? It is my opinion that both church and clergy need to return to the gospels. I believe that the primary responsibilities and roles of a local church pastor are to be pastor, prophet and priest—potentially, in that order. There is without question tremendous need for evangelists, for administrators, for organizational managers, and clergy should be equipped to engage these ministries. However, those should never be the marks by which a pastor’s ministry is judged, nor the call to ordained ministry discerned.

Throughout all four gospels we find a Jesus who empowers others. In the synoptic gospels Jesus begins as the sole miracle-worker. Then he commissions the disciples to venture out on his behalf. Over and over Jesus does not simply *do* ministry, he *involves* people *in* ministry. He equips the saints and then gets out of the way. Jesus understood that he would not be with the disciples forever. If the saving work of the God of Israel was to continue, Jesus had to train, teach and inspire the next generation to carry out the work.

Pastors must do likewise. Too often, pastors get caught up in the success of an initiative or the direction of a program. It’s so easy to become distracted by the myriad pressures and competing expectations. Pastors must separate their egos from the outcomes of their efforts and begin training lay people to carry out the work of ministry—from organizational administration, to budgets, to church growth and evangelism—all of it.

Just like Jesus, pastors must understand that they will not be with their congregations forever. Either by death or by the redirection of God’s call, the pastor will eventually give up the controls. If the saving work of the God of Jesus Christ is to

continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, pastors must train, teach and inspire the next generation to carry out this holy work.