



Christian administration?

A theological introduction

A15: Articles series: Administration

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The title of this article ends with a question mark. This is because you may well be wondering how the adjective 'Christian' can possibly be applied to the noun 'administration'. Is there such a thing as administration which is in itself Christian, other than administration that is simply carried out *by* a Christian? Does this pair of words have any coherent meaning?

I am passionate about the value of a Spirit-centred administration to enable the Church to fulfil her God-given service under the Lordship of Christ. My prayer is that everyone who reads this will grasp something of the beauty of the jewel of administration in God's service.

If that last statement makes you blink, please stay with me! If you feel that you may be called by God to some form of specifically administrative service, I hope this article will encourage you in that and excite you with this special and much needed area of Christian ministry.

But if your main gifting lies elsewhere, for example in teaching, in pastoral care or in evangelism, my aim here is not to divert you from your main calling, but to help you see administration in a new light, and to enable you to do what you need to do of it well so that it both serves and enhances your main work.

This article can only be a brief introduction to a significant subject. It tackles three distinct themes:

- Part 1 The work of administration
- Part 2 The gifts of administration
- Part 3 The character of the administrator.

1: The work of administration

Administration is a misunderstood subject. It could also be said to be in urgent need of an image makeover! This first part suggests two definitions. Part 2, *The gifts of administration*, will tackle its image in a Christian context.

Neither seen nor heard

The first thing is to unlearn some likely misconceptions you have about this subject. Reality is elusive for the reason that:

Good administration is almost invisible and silent.

It is bad administration that people notice. You come to your church's main worship service of the week. You remember each of the following because you experience it with some pain:

- The building is too cold for comfort because the heating was not switched on in time.
- The notice-sheet has misinformation which has to be corrected during the service.
- The singing is chaotic because the Music Group do not know the items chosen.
- The person reading the Scripture passage was given the wrong chapter to read.
- The speaker has brought the wrong notes and struggles through the sermon.
- The person on the coffee rota forgot and everyone has to wait ten minutes.

That sounds like a pretty wretched service! But if just one of those was true, the impact would still be obvious. Bad organisation shouts loudly.

Now consider the same service with nothing in that list going wrong. What should be people's abiding memory? Assuming the front-line ministries of preaching, music, intercession, lesson-reading and so on are done well, it will not be the good administration that people remember. It should be how God spoke to them through the exposition of his Word, how the music helped them to praise and honour their Saviour, how they enjoyed being with their fellow-believers as a foretaste of heaven.

That is exactly how it should be. Bad administration is keenly felt and becomes the focus. Good administration is invisible and points away from itself to the real purpose of what is going on. So people tend not to notice the administration that is done properly, but remember it well when it is not. In the world, think of the frustrations of bureaucracy, call

centres, unintelligible instruction manuals, and so on.

A first definition

So what exactly is administration? Here is one possible definition in a Christian context:

Administration is the organisation and co-ordination of the earthly resources that are available in the service of Christ.

Going back to the example above, the resources needed for the church service include:

- the people taking part – which means everyone, but especially those leading different activities;
- the building including its heating, lighting, cleanliness, safety;
- the physical materials such as furniture, flowers, books, notice-sheets;
- the technology such as the sound system and multi-media;
- the finance to enable staff to be paid and supplies obtained.

All of these need to be organised. So in winter the heating needs to come on well before people arrive. This means some sort of switching system and a boiler that works properly. That involves maintenance and, at some stage in the past, the choice of best purchase. There may need to be insurance against breakdown, contracts for fuel suppliers, bills to be paid, safety to be checked. All this so that the people who gather for the service do not notice the temperature but can focus on meeting with God together, which is why they have come.

But the heating of the church has to be co-ordinated with other resources. The timing for the heat depends on the timing for and length of the service. If the service next week is at a different time, the heating needs to be changed. The paying of the bills for the gas can only be made if there are sufficient funds coming in and/or not too many other bills to pay. Maintenance may depend on people's availability and skills. Most resources have to be shared

between all kinds of other activities, so co-ordination is essential.

A second definition

All this implies two conflicting aspects of our subject. First

Administration SERVES every other ministry.

It is a lowly topic for it only exists to promote other things. Its purpose is to enable the work of God to flourish. So it shuns the limelight, it does not try to announce itself. This implies that those who want to play centre-stage are unlikely to make contented administrators. If administration becomes the end rather than the means, there is trouble.

But, secondly,

Administration serves EVERY OTHER MINISTRY.

It is hugely important because it enables everything else to happen! It is not restricted to one corner of the life of the church, it affects absolutely everything. This is because everything has an organisational element to it (even preaching, music and prayer), and because all activities need to be co-ordinated to work in harmony.

It overlaps with the subject of management (which itself links to leadership), but is more concerned with (and here is an alternative definition):

The practical, behind-the-scenes aspects of making everything happen.

Without this nothing could function.

Soul-less bureaucracy?

Many people see administration as having no heart. But, again, this comes about through the high visibility of *poor* administration. First,

Administration should be a creative, people-centred ministry.

If this subject is all about the organisation and co-ordination of resources, and if the Church

especially is all about people, then administration serves people in appropriate ways. It should not be visible, but neither should it be face-less. If it comes from God himself (see the exercises below), it should mirror something of his creativity. *(cont on next page)*

EXERCISES for Part 1

Big picture overviews

Here are four large-scale biblical scenarios that it would be worth studying from an administrative perspective.

- 1 **Creation**
Read Genesis chapters 1 to 3. What principles of administration, as defined in this part of this article, do you feel can be derived from this passage?
- 2 **The story of Moses**
Skim through the whole books of Exodus and Numbers. What principles of administration do you feel can be derived from the Children of Israel's journey from Egypt to the Promised Land?

Compare Exodus chapter 18 with Genesis 1:28. Although there are clear differences, is there any sense in which the principle of God giving people charge over his creation is being worked out in Jethro's advice to Moses?
- 3 **Incarnation**
If you have time to do some theological research and thinking, consider what the idea of incarnation implies for administration, focusing perhaps on John 1:1-18. God himself came into our world, born of a human mother. Those who put a neat dividing line between the 'spiritual' and the 'practical' would do well to study this idea.
- 4 **Detailed lists**
The Bible contains a number of listings, for example the genealogies in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapter 3, the system of a book such as Leviticus, the details of Solomon's life and the building of the temple in 1 Kings chapters 4 to 7, and others. Why do you think this level of detail is included in the canon of Scripture? What relevance does it have for us today?

Secondly,

Administration should be effective as well as efficient.

Administration needs to help things to be done efficiently in the best sense of that word. Good administration avoids waste: waste of time, of people's gifts, of money, of effort. The aim is to organise all resources well, to go for quality, to harness all the resources in the best way possible. That is efficiency and it is a good concept.

But before you can consider HOW to organise something well, you need to ask WHY you are

organising this 'something' in the first place, or WHY you are doing it in the way you are. There is a danger that you may be organising the wrong things, or simply doing something because you have always done it in the past. If you organise the wrong things well, you can do terrible harm! Better to organise them badly; best of all, not to organise them at all. Effectiveness means making the right choices.

So you need to use resources not only efficiently but effectively. (But, being realistic, accept that it will not always work out as well as this.) Before you start to administer you should stand back and check you are doing the right thing. The simplest way to do this is to ask the question 'Why?' all the time.

2: The gifts of administration

This second part investigates 1 Corinthians chapter 12. Try to take some time to read it through slowly. Then study it with a commentary if you can.

The overview of 1 Corinthians 12

A simplistic reading of this well-known passage sees 'those with gifts of administration' in verse 28 and considers the case closed.

That is true, and it is a wonderful truth whose implications are great, though sadly ignored in many quarters. But this passage has far more to teach than that. Grabbing hold of that single word 'administration' in verse 28 is not quite enough. The latest NIV translates it 'guidance'. NRSV has 'forms of leadership'.

First of all, you need to have a Scripture-wide view of administration. Even within this chapter you need to grasp the context for these gifts:

- It is God who gives and operates each of them (v6).
- The gifts are given for the benefit of other members of the church (v7).
- Everyone has been given a gift to contribute (v7).
- All contributions are needed (v21).

The whole force of the chapter is both the diversity of the gifts (a theme that many preachers focus on), and the unity of the one Body (a theme that is not so common but just as powerfully expressed in the passage). And if you place this chapter alongside other similar ones in the New Testament, you find no one definitive list of gifts but a rainbow of examples from a

generous God who gives the tools to his people to be his Church.

So be cautious before you define an explicit 'gift of administration'. But there are two points to make from this passage with certainty, and others that are probable.

Gifts that are specifically administrative

That truth has not been heard sufficiently clearly in the Church. For many (usually those with the more dramatic gifts of leadership, teaching, tongues, etc.) administration is given second-class status. They divide ministries into the 'spiritual' and the 'practical', the implication being that the practical ones are not spiritual! They regard administration as a bore or a chore (which it may be for them), rather than something that, in the right person, can be creative, innovative and health-giving.

Others divide the gifts into those that are supernatural and those that are natural. Administration, of course, is dumped into the second category.

They should take care! In this passage Paul speaks of them all in the same breath as God-appointed (v28), parts of Christ's body (v27) and charismatic gifts of the Spirit (v13) – note the Trinitarian theme. More than that, even, for the

supposedly natural gifts of helpers and administrators in verse 28 are sandwiched between some rather up-front gifts such as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle-workers, healing (which come before these two), and tongue-speaking and, a verse later, interpretation, which come after.

There is much debate about the difference between natural abilities and spiritual gifts. I can think of people who are professional administrators at work, handling considerable budgets, who I would not regard as having a spiritual gift in this area, if only because they apply their abilities in ways that do not do justice to the Church as 'body' or bring honour to Christ.

There is much to learn from the secular workplace, but there are clear differences too, first because a church is a volunteer society rather than a contractual commercial operation, and secondly because there are issues of theology as to exactly what a church is. The 'body' picture is used here but there are many others, including 'family'.

More than one administrative gift

The Greek word for 'administration' that Paul uses is *kuberneseis*. It is not a common word, but it seems to be a metaphorical use of a nautical term meaning navigation. The secular official who carried out this task is translated (in NIV) as 'pilot' in Acts 27:11 or 'sea captain' in Revelation 18:17. This person guided the enterprise by steering its course. So the underlying idea is a leader of people more than a behind-the-scenes paper-pusher. This is no doubt why AV translated it 'governments' and NIV has now changed to 'guidance'.

So why is it often translated 'administration'? You need to understand culture here. In the UK people use the word rather differently from Americans who talk about the 'Trump' (or whoever) 'administration'. So they see it in leadership terms, steering the course of the nation. Dictionaries back up this idea of 'government'. It is us Brits who tend to take a more lowly view of the word and reduce it to 'admin'.

But it is still a good word. For a start, note that 'administration' and 'ministry' have the same root in English (even though some try to put a wedge between them). And the definitions above have included the idea of this kind of administration by introducing the idea of co-ordination.

So where does that put you if you see yourself not as a leader, but as a behind-the-scenes servant, helping things to run smoothly?

So far we have ignored the gift that precedes administration, 'those able to help others'. The

root meaning of this Greek term, *antilempseis*, is 'those who take their turn'. You might think of those on a rota. The same kind of word comes in Luke 1:54 when God is described as helping Israel, and in Acts 20:35 when Paul shows how to help the weak.

So perhaps there is here the kind of behind-the-scenes administration that you may be more familiar with: those on the coffee rota, those who write the minutes of the meeting, those in the church office. And overall there are two gifts representing two parts of what you might regard as an administrative spectrum, from the co-ordination of all church activity to the humble organisation of one aspect of it. It is all part of administration.

Other likely conclusions

That is as far as we can go with certainty, but there are other lessons we can more tentatively take from this passage.

First, there is a sense of order (see the 'first'... 'second' ... 'third' in verse 28) and the two gifts are sandwiched between some more dramatic ones. So they are not also-rans and, as the gift of helping comes before the more leadership-administrative one, there is perhaps special honour in the lowlier position.

Secondly, do not gifted helpers develop sometimes into gifted leaders? I can think of a number of people in ordained ministry who started off as Church Administrators. Consider, too, both Stephen and Philip in the list of administrators in Acts 6:5, although not everyone will be called on to be an evangelist or a martyr!

(cont on next page)

EXERCISES for Part 2

- 1 Consider some famous biblical administrators who might come into the 'leadership' category. What can you learn from OT characters such as Joseph, or Nehemiah? Who else might you add to the list?
- 2 Consider some biblical administrators who might come into the 'helping' category. What can we learn from NT characters such as Procorus (Acts 6:5 is the only time we hear about him and four of his friends in that verse), Martha (Luke 10:38-42), and Judas Iscariot (who seems to have been the Treasurer for the apostles)? Who else might you add to the list?

Thirdly, our two gifts are not repeated in verses 29 and 30, like the rest. Might this be because everyone is called to be a helper in some form, even if some are specially gifted in this area? It is certainly true that everyone needs to administer their own life and work. Everyone has to be a personal administrator.

Implications for today

- 1 If you are an administrator in any form, be encouraged! However others regard your ministry, the Bible rates it highly.
- 2 Your administration is a spiritual ministry to be done for the benefit of the church. These gifts may be behind-the-scenes, but they need God's Spirit in them as much as any gift.

- 3 If you feel you have been given gifts in this area, seek to use them and develop them. God may well have plans for future ministry for you that go well beyond what you are doing now.
- 4 One development might be into a post such as 'Church Manager' or 'Operations Director', covering co-ordination at a leadership level.
- 5 Encourage your church's leaders to see these gifts in this light, to teach about them, and to honour their use. If you want ideas here, try Training Notes TN21, *Ideas for a sermon on administration*, elsewhere in the Resources section of this website.

What else would you add as you ponder on this passage?

3: The character of the administrator

In comparison with the last part which was designed to encourage you, this may seem rather more scary. If you hold the view that almost anyone can do administration, the 'job description' for the role to be played is of prime importance. But the Bible sees a need for people gifted by God for this work, and gives the strong line that it is the 'person profile' that is more important.

Acts 6:1-7

Study Acts 6:1-7 (already mentioned in passing). This is a telling of a story of what happened rather than a teaching passage. But it does seem to have been an excellent example and one we can learn from.

The Jerusalem church was growing rapidly (consider the administration that might have been involved with that!) but there were two groups: Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews. There were, no doubt, some natural tensions between these groups already. It seems that one issue that came to the fore was that the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution (of money or food).

It was probably a result of poor administration (and, from the start of Part 1 you know what *that* does). These widows would have been relying on the church's generosity for their daily needs. No benefit payments existed then. This resulted in some measure of disquiet throughout the congregation – and that is no doubt an understatement. Something had to be done. The apostles could have looked after it and sorted it. But they saw they had other priorities without which the Church could not grow (see

w2,4). So, after a church meeting, they appointed (or 'ordained') seven people to take charge of this practical but important task. What might be said about these seven?

- 1 They all have Greek names – so it looks as though their choice was made with some political sensitivity.
- 2 Philip developed into an evangelist of some note, and Stephen into a leader who was martyred. The rest are never heard of again, but the implication is that they got on with the work and the problem was solved. God blessed the church with further growth (v7) with the apostles now released for their primary ministry and the grumbling put to rest.
- 3 But the apostles made it clear that those chosen had to be 'full of the Spirit and wisdom'. No hint of 'anyone will do for this basic task'. On the contrary, they had to be very special Christians. This may well have been because of the tricky nature of the problem, or it may be because this job had to be done really well. Either way, it required people of some spiritual calibre.

A more detailed person profile

Some years later, when Paul came to write to Timothy about how to look after the churches he was responsible for, he laid down some person profile guidelines for those Timothy was to select as leaders – or ‘elders’. You will find the list in 1 Timothy 3:1-7. That sounds wise. It makes sense to appoint mature Christians.

Then he goes on with an equivalent list for the ‘deacons’, an office for more practical service that seems to have developed by then in those churches; administrators might be the best modern understanding of the term. The worrying thing, for us administrators that is, is that the list is almost a copy of the person profile for the elders! You can find it in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Note some intriguing points about it.

- 1 Their character and behaviour are to be beyond criticism, just as though they were spiritual leaders (v8).
- 2 They should be people of deeply held faith

in Christ – this is a point that really matters and in fact their service will help grow their faith further (w 9,13).

- 3 They should undergo examination before appointment (v10).
- 4 The requirements on them extend to their family life too (w11,12).

Presumably Paul is referring to people rather more in the leadership type of administration than those who simply put the chairs out before the meetings, but it makes you stop and think.

On the other hand, it is encouraging too. For this is yet another example of how seriously the Bible takes the ministry of administration. The fact that the type of person matters so much must mean that the ministry is a vital one for the health of the church.

But as an administrator myself, I wobble at the knees every time I read this passage. And perhaps that is no bad thing.

Administration is too often viewed as doing things by rote, of filling in forms in triplicate, and of following a restrictive code of practice. Christian administration (I believe we *can* use the title I gave this article) is different. It is a behind-the-scenes spiritual ministry that can have enormous impact for the advance of the Kingdom. It requires the Spirit’s creativity and it calls for people of godly character. It can banish much frustration and help people trust the Church today. If done well and by the right people, it can release our spiritual leaders to focus on their priorities, so that churches can be healthy.

Its importance is growing all the time. This is partly because the amount of statutory administration that churches have to conform to has increased hugely over the past few years. Life is so much more complex now. There is considerable documentation involved in issues such as child protection, financial regulations, good practice guidelines, health and safety, and so on. Churches have taken on lay (ie. not ordained) staff and then have issues of employment legislation. Discrimination legislation affects us all. If we get something wrong people today are far more likely to sue than in the past, so we need to give more time to assessing insurance risks. Churches with schools have found great increases in the reading up involved in being a governor. And so it goes on.

How vital is it that churches develop administrative systems that are people-friendly, simple, innovative and flexible, and seek out people gifted in this area and enable them to use their gifts, all for the glory of the Lord of the Church, the head of the Body.

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles> then A15. It is an adapted version of the first unit of his Administration module for a course published by the Good Book Company. For details see <https://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/administration>. See also the St John’s, Nottingham / UCAN distance learning course ‘The work of a Church Administrator’ unit 3.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services on any aspect of church administration.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A15 under Administration.

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