

A Question of Pastoral Integrity and Compassion

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“Care for God’s people, bear their burdens and do not betray their confidence. So discipline yourself in life and teaching that you preserve the truth, giving no occasion for false security and illusory hope. Witness faithfully in word and deed to all people. Give and receive comfort as you serve within the Church. And be of good courage, for God has called you, and your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”

Book of Occasional Services 1992

Service of Ordination p.197

“Care for God’s people, bear their burdens and do not betray their confidence.”

As pastors we are called by God to be shepherds of his people. That God has deigned to give authority and responsibility to fragile human beings boggles the mind. An old Irish legend has Jesus and Gabriel conversing in heaven about the God’s plan for salvation. Gabriel listens carefully and after reflecting for a moment responds, “So you’re telling me that you’re going to go to earth as a child, be born in a cowshed, live among them, teach them, love them, be tortured and strung up on a cross to die. They’re going to scatter like sheep, but you’re going to rise again and leave them the responsibility of teaching the world what you’ve left them?” Jesus replies, “That’s pretty well it.” To which Gabriel asks, “Have you got another plan?” Jesus says, “Nope, that’s it.”

Puts it into perspective doesn’t it? At least it does for me. We are it. Us, the Church, those called out to deliver the good news in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are therefore called to be far more than administrators, or therapeutic counsellors. We are called to be proclaimers of the good news. As such, we love and care for one another, walking in the Spirit of Christ bearing, as Paul writes in Galatians, each others’ burdens and in doing so fulfilling the law of Christ. As we listen, hear and receive people’s struggles we lift them up in prayer, walk beside them and keep their confidence assuring them in confession that their struggles are known only to God and the confessor.

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As we then live faithfully serving each other in Christian love, we clergy (in fact, all believers) are admonished to walk in the Spirit of Christ and his truth. Pastor/teachers are especially called to serve faithfully in preserving the truth of the faith, guarding what has passed down from the beginning (1 Tim. 6:20; 1 Cor. 15:1-3); the essentials of the faith and the particulars of our Lutheran understanding of the gospel.

For clergy today this can be an immensely anxious task as we are met with the demands of society and culture. “The heart,” Jeremiah relates is, “deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Can we expect any less from a culture that has abandoned the biblical foundations for its own existence?

As witness to Jeremiah, the Church of Christ is constantly set about by society and culture to endorse cultural and societal beliefs that are not in accord with Christian faith and practice.

Various issues are continually brought before the Church asking for approval in which the Church has no authority to approve.

When the people of the Church struggle, as all persons do with sinful desires, words and deeds, pastors are called to be compassionate, knowing their own struggles. It is in this arena of struggle, grace and submission to the will of God that pastors are also admonished to be disciplined in their personal life and understanding of the gospel and Lutheran Confessions.

It is enough to be accountable for one's own sins; but to be called to preach, teach and give pastoral care for others is indeed an extraordinary responsibility that can only be given and equipped by the Holy Spirit. For the ordained are called not simply to be counsellors, but to give pastoral care of the soul in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is thus necessary for pastors to walk beside those who struggle in their sin and lovingly, gently exhort those who willingly live in impenitence. Prayer, pastoral care and gentleness are the tools by which the Word of God is to be conveyed to those who believe, despite the perspicuity of scripture, that their particular sinful behaviour is not sin, but blessing.

As such, being accountable to the call of God and to the teaching of the scriptures as handed down by the Church, pastors are exhorted to give "no occasion for false security and illusory hope" (OS p. 197). Therefore, as difficult as it may be, pastors are to hold fast to the voice of the Shepherd and not yield to the voices of culture and society, but to remember the exhortation given by the Church in their ordination rite:

"The Church in which you are to be ordained confesses that the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God and are the norm of its faith and life. We accept, teach and confess the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian Creeds. We also acknowledge the Lutheran Confessions as true witnesses and faithful expositions of the Holy Scriptures. Will you therefore preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures and these creeds and confessions?" (OS., 1992 p.194)

"Witness faithfully in word and deed to all people."

Therefore, the Word of God and the voice of the Church catholic as articulated by the Lutheran Confessions are to be the norm and guide for the life of the pastor and the people of God. Despite the sweetness and attractions found in the smooth words spoken by the various idols of our times, those called to ordained ministry are to cling to the words of our Living Lord, King and Judge. For as the writer to the Hebrews warns, "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God" (Heb. 10:31).

As the water naturally finds its way from the mountain to the sea, so too ought our hearts and minds be satisfied with streams of living water. The psalmist writes, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers" (Psalm 1).

For the children of God, there is no other authority, no other source from which we take sustenance and strength, but the Word of God. As such, we are called to the difficult task of discerning truth from error, to love in truth and listen with compassion as we accept all people and exhort all to live a life of repentance.

“Give and receive comfort as you serve within the Church.”

St. Paul writes to the Galatians, “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:12).

As we hear the Word of God we are reminded that we do not escape our humanity as we are known by Christ. If anything, we realize our unity in this world as sinners loved by a forgiving and merciful God. We are all called to repentance and in Christ we are transformed to be truly human and worshippers of the Triune God; the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It is also a temptation to forget that God has not called us to be “successful,” but to be faithful. Our call is to walk in the footsteps of Jesus and not those of the world. For if we are to accept the logic and assertions of popular culture that certain sins are not sin, what then does the gospel have to say to those who are not in need of forgiveness?

Walking in this world, we recognize our own propensity to sin in thought, word and deed and are thus called to love one another, seeing Jesus in each other. As such, we are called to discernment and reconciliation not judgmentalism. As we give and receive comfort we are also called to walk in the Spirit in truth and compassion, being accountable to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

“And be of good courage, for God has called you, and your labour in the Lord is not in vain.”

Being children of light in the kingdom of God we are reminded that there is a conflict of cosmic dimension surrounding us. Standing firm upon the Word of God, equipped by the Spirit of Christ, the believer is constantly assailed by the kingdom of darkness and the father of lies. Living in these dark days the pastor and all believers will be tempted by the illusion of evil overshadowing the work of God in our world, society and culture.

Nonetheless, the Word of God encourages us to remember that “we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken (therefore) let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:28).

We must never forget that the Lord God has the final Word. Faithfulness is not without its rewards, for God is our Friend and sees what we do in public or secret. As such, despite what the world has to say, how difficult the task becomes, how hated we are because we do not condone what the world accepts; we must remember that our Lord was hated and persecuted as well.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11, 12).

Father in heaven, equip us with your strength and grace to meet the struggles and temptations from the flesh, the world and the devil. Draw us close to your heart that we may know your heartbeat of love for all people and be found faithful on that Day when you shall be all in all. We ask this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen

**Sola Deo Gloria
Crux Probat Omnia**