

Equipping the Believers as Disciples

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The theme chosen for this synodical convention, “Equipping the Believers,” encourages us to focus our attention on the local congregation. This is entirely appropriate, for that is where the action is, that is where the work of the church is being carried out on a day-to-day basis. Since the Synod is no more than the sum total of its congregations, what the congregations are doing, or failing to do, is precisely what the Synod is doing, or failing to do.

The titles for the three convention essays, which were suggested by an article of the WELS Model Constitution and Bylaws for Congregations, likewise lead us to give special attention to the work of the congregations of our Synod. Article III states: “The continuing purpose of this congregation, as a gathering of Christians is to serve all people in God’s world with the gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures (Matthew 28:18-20).” It then lists three primary congregational objectives which, if faithfully carried out, will fulfill this purpose:

1. To proclaim the law and the gospel, to lead sinners to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for life and salvation (2 Timothy 4:2; Luke 24:46-48).
2. To strengthen believers in faith and sanctification through the means of grace (Romans 10:17).
3. To equip believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses for sharing the gospel of Jesus with our fellow men (Ephesians 4:11,12).

Our convention is emphasizing objective #3: “To equip believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses.” This, the constitution maintains, should be one of the primary objectives of our congregations if they desire to fulfill the lofty purpose of “serving all people in God’s world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

When we talk about equipping believers for serving as disciples, stewards and witnesses we are talking about one of the doctrines of the Scriptures that Luther dearly prized, a doctrine to which he refers again and again in his writings, the doctrine of the universal priesthood of believers. When we talk about equipping believers for service we are talking also about another doctrine held in high esteem by Luther, the doctrine of the public ministry. In fact, if we properly understand and apply the doctrines of the universal priesthood and of the public ministry, then the objective of equipping believers as disciples, stewards and witnesses will be fulfilled in our midst.

We will explore this topic, “Equipping Believers As Disciples,” on the basis of three biblically-based propositional statements:

**All Christians are priests with a
ministry to perform (1 Peter 2 : 4-10).**

**The special work of called spiritual leaders is
to equip God’s people for ministry (Ephesians 4:1-13).**

**Equipping begins with discipling, teaching
God’s people everything Christ commanded (Matthew 28:18-20).**

I. All Christians Are Priests with a Ministry To Perform

That all Christians are priests with a ministry to perform is simply and clearly taught in 1 Peter 2:4-10. Peter begins this section by drawing two pictures of Christians:

As you come to him, the living Stone -- rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him -- you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (vv 4,5).

Christians, writes Peter, are living stones, part of the one temple of God of which Jesus is the Cornerstone; and Christians are priests, holy priests, set apart from the unbelieving world and consecrated for the service of God. No longer do they have to depend on a special class of people, the priests of the Old Testament, to offer up sacrifices to God on their behalf. They themselves can offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

In the verses that follow Peter develops more fully the picture of Christians as living stones built upon the "chosen and perfect cornerstone" (vv 6-8). Then Peter amplifies his picture of Christians as a holy priesthood (v 9): "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

In the Greek text the word "you" is in the emphatic position. "But as for You" he begins. He is making a contrast here. In the previous verse he has talked about the unbelievers, those who rejected Jesus as the Cornerstone of the Church, who stumbled over his claim to be the Messiah and consequently lost out on the opportunity to be built upon the only sure Cornerstone and Foundation. Now he is addressing the only other group there is, those who did not reject Christ as the Cornerstone, the believers.

In this verse Peter tells us two things: who we are and what our function is. He tells us who we are by giving all believers four significant titles. These titles have a number of things in common. For one thing, each of them was used by God in the Old Testament to describe his people, Israel. Secondly, each of these titles is a statement of fact. You and I don't have to strive to become "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." That is what we are. Thirdly, each of these titles is a singular noun, a reminder that the many people privileged to lay claim to them—all believers, in fact—are one in Christ, as St. Paul writes in Romans 12: "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (v 5). A fourth point of similarity: Each title is portraying the same truth as every other title; for each is a description of the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. The Church is a "chosen people." The Church is a "royal priesthood." The Church is a "holy nation." The Church is a "people belonging to God."

"You are a chosen people." "My people, my chosen," God called the people of Israel (Is 43:20). Both words are significant. The word translated as "people" has in it the idea of being in the family. "Chosen" is a reminder that the formation of this particular family was God's doing entirely. Think of how God chose Abraham out of all the peoples on earth, chose him and his descendants to be his people through whose promised Descendant all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

God has now given this title to us. All believers in Jesus are God's "chosen people," chosen "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit" (1 Pe 1:2).

"You are a ... royal priesthood." This and the next two titles are drawn from Exodus 19:5-6, where the Lord instructed Moses what to tell the Israelites who were assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Moses was to remind Israel of what the Lord had done to Egypt on their behalf and how he had carried them "on eagles' wings" to this place of freedom. "Now," says the Lord, "if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."

One cannot help but notice the conditional character of this covenant. If Israel would obey God and in that way keep its part of the covenant, then God would look upon this people as his treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Israel, however, failed miserably to live up to its side of the covenant; but

what Israel by disobedience gave up, God by the new covenant of Jesus' blood has graciously given—to his Church. The Apostle John exclaims, “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” (Rev 1:5-6).

Our title is “priests.” Through Jesus we have the right and authority to approach God directly. No one, other than Jesus, ever needs to come between us and God.

Our title is “royal priests.” We are priests who belong to and are in the service of the king. Through Jesus we stand in a royal position, with no one over us except God himself.

“You are a ... holy nation.” The word translated as “holy” has in it the idea of being set apart from something as well as for something. As with Israel of old, God has called us to himself. He has set us apart from the ungodly, unbelieving world and has set us apart for a brand new life of dedicated, consecrated service.

“You are a ... people belonging to God.” We are God's own special possession, “bought at a price,” (1 Cor 6:20), “not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pe 1:18-19). “Our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, gave himself for us,” writes Paul to Titus, “to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Tt 2:13-14). “Once you were not a people,” says Peter, “but now you are the people of God” (1 Pe 2:10).

Christians do not have to suffer from an identity crisis. Who are we, each of us? We are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

Nor do we have to have doubts regarding our purpose. These four titles, “chosen people,” “royal priesthood,” “holy nation,” “a people belonging to God,” R. C. Lenski reminds us, are not “static but dynamic.”¹ We have not just become something; we have become something for a purpose: “That you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” This is what God looked for from Israel, “the people I formed for myself,” he says, “that they may proclaim my praise” (Is 43:21). Now he looks for praise from his new people.

Our purpose is to “declare” God's praises. This is an action word, a word that has in it the idea of telling out, making widely known. It carries in it a picture of conveying to those on the outside a message that is known to those on the inside.

Our purpose is to tell out God's “praises,” his excellencies, his shining, eminent qualities, his wonderful deeds. Our purpose is to tell the world how great God is, a greatness that is to be seen especially in his saving acts. As he rescued Israel from slavery, so he has rescued us from the worst slavery of all. As he destroyed Israel's enemies by the Red Sea, so he has destroyed our enemies by the cross and empty tomb of Jesus. The best “spiritual sacrifice” (v 5) we can offer up to God as priests of God is to declare the praises of the one who by the gospel has effectively called us out of the darkness of sin, unbelief and death into the light of forgiveness, faith and life. “Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine.”

It is clear beyond fear of contradiction that the titles Peter here puts forward are the common possession of all Christians and that therefore all Christians share in the purpose of declaring to others the wonderful works of God.

This truth of the priesthood of all believers, so clearly taught in the Scriptures, but so heavily obscured for over one thousand years,² was brought into the light again through the Reformation. Luther writes:

Peter [in 1 Pet 2:9,10] names the people and the congregation very clearly, and he calls them all together a royal priesthood and commands them to preach the deeds of God who has called them Thereby the Holy Spirit teaches us that ointments, consecrations, tonsures,

¹ Lenski, R. C. *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1945), p 102.

² Schaff, Philip. *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 2:123-131. Schaff points out that separation of the clergy from the laity began as early as the third century. During this century it became customary to apply the word “priest” exclusively to the Christian minister. Schaff calls Cyprian (d. 258) the “father of the sacerdotal conception of the Christian ministry as a mediating agency between God and the people.”

chasubles, albs, chalices, masses, sermons, etc., do not make priests or give power. Rather, priesthood and power have to be there first, brought from baptism and common to all Christians through the faith which builds them upon Christ the true high priest, as St. Peter says here.³

The church father Jerome said something similar back in the fourth century. “Baptism,” he said, “is the ordination of the laity.”

Luther was also insistent ‘in maintaining that, in view of passages such as 1 Peter 2:19, all Christians possess the means of grace and have the right, the duty, in fact, to use them. He writes, “No one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest But if it is true that they have God’s word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread [his word].”⁴ George Sweazey puts it this way: “The effect of the Reformation was not to destroy the priesthood and leave a church of laymen, but to destroy the laity and leave a church of priests.”⁵

We of the WELS, together with Luther, wholeheartedly subscribe to the Bible’s doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Prof. Wilbert Gawrisch, for example, writes:

The priesthood of the New Testament is universal. It belongs to all believers. All of them are royal priests. All of them, therefore, also possess the ministry of the Spirit, the authority and right to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments. Jesus gave the Great Commission not only to the apostles, but all his disciples Every Christian Possesses the Ministry of the Keys.⁶

This is not a new teaching in our Synod. About seventy-five years ago John Schaller, president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary from 1908-1920, wrote in an article entitled, “The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry”:

The Holy Scriptures incontrovertibly show that the ministry, that is, the commission to preach the gospel, is given to every Christian; that at conversion not only the ability but also the impetus for this preaching is implanted in him; and that the gospel by its very nature as a message presupposes this preaching activity and at the same time by the effect it has guarantees it will occur. Who now wishes to be so bold as to limit the way the ministry is carried out to a single form of presenting the word of salvation [i.e., the pastoral office]?⁷

Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood perhaps overstates the case a bit, but certainly gets his point across, when he says, “Church-goer is a vulgar, ignorant word; it must never be used; you are the church wherever you go.”⁸ The continuing challenge before us, it appears, is to put this truth into practice, that the church consists of nothing but priests, that the priests are the church and therefore are called to do the work of the church, “to declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

The place where all of God’s people are called to serve as priests is in their private lives. We do this in two ways. First, by the testimony of a godly life we function as the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Mt 5:13). This may well be the primary way by which Christians will be able to impact an increasingly secularized society, which is not necessarily hostile to religion, but simply doesn’t find it particularly relevant or

³ From Luther’s response to Jerome Emser, vicar in Meissen, who maintained that there are two kinds of priesthood, a lay priesthood and a priestly one, 1521 (Luther’s Works, American Edition [AE], vol 39, pp 236-237).

⁴ “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teachings and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers,” 1523 (AE, vol 39, p 309).

⁵ Sweazey, George E. *Effective Evangelism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), p 90.

⁶ Gawrisch, Wilbert R. “A Royal Priesthood Proclaiming God’s Praise” (Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly [WLQ], 75:4 [Oct 1978], p 287). This essay was originally presented to the 1978 convention of the South Atlantic District.

⁷ As translated and printed in the WLQ, 78:1 (Jan 1981) pp 30, 31, 38.

⁸ Stevens, R. Paul. *Liberating the Laity: Equipping All the Saints for Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), p 52.

meaningful. If the people around us see something attractive about our lives, they will tend to be more willing to allow us to tell them about the life-giving, life-changing gospel.

We also declare the praises of God in our private lives by the testimony of our lips. Jesus told the demoniac of Gerasa out of whom he had driven a legion of demons, “Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you” (Mk 5:20). Prof. Schaller gives several examples of such private functioning as a priest of God:

When a Christian laborer in his daily activities counters with a clear witness to Christ a scoffer who blasphemes in his presence, then he has engaged in gospel preaching, for he has borne witness to the contents of the gospel. When Christians at a social gathering privately discuss with one another the great deeds God has done to accomplish the salvation of sinners, even if this is in a most informal way, the gospel is then under discussion, and the one who gives expression to it is carrying on the ministry. When a member of the family or a Christian neighbor who is not a pastor, yes, when a mother, sister, or Christian neighbor lady offers a sick person the comfort of the forgiveness of sins or in some other way strengthens his patience by pointing to the goodness of God our Savior, spiritual priests and priestesses are functioning in the New Testament ministry.⁹

God’s priests can put their priestly function into action in a second arena, that of the public ministry, that is, ministry which one is called to do in the name of and on behalf of one’s fellow Christians. When Christians gather together into congregations, there are certain functions of the ministry of the gospel that can hardly be carried out by all at the same time without disorder and confusion, e.g., preaching in the worship service and administering the sacraments when the congregation is gathered together. There are also functions of the ministry for which all Christians are not equally gifted.¹⁰ Not every Christian, for example, is able to teach a group of children or adults. It is for functions such as these that Jesus instituted the public ministry. Luther writes:

You should put the Christian into two places. First, if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so. This is what Stephen did Acts 6-7, even though he had not been ordered into any office by the apostles. Yet he still preached and did great signs among the people. Again, Philip the deacon and Stephen’s comrade, Acts 8:5, did the same thing even though the office of preaching was not commanded to him either Second, if he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself. Instead he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by command of the others.¹¹

The form of the public ministry most familiar to us in our day is the pastoral office. It is the broadest and most comprehensive in scope, since the pastor is called to oversee the entire ministry of the gospel within the congregation. The pastoral office, however, is not the only proper form of public ministry. The New Testament gives several other examples, e.g., apostles, prophets, elder/overseers, deacons, evangelists, pastor/teachers, and teachers.

Luther, too, recognized that the public ministry should not be equated with and restricted to the pastoral office. WELS theologian and Seminary professor, August Pieper, in an article examining Luther’s doctrine of

⁹ op. cit., p 39.

¹⁰ A study of Romans 12:1-8 and 1 Corinthians 12 bears this out, where the Apostle Paul makes it clear that the Holy Spirit grants different gifts to different people, “just as he determines” (1 Cor 12:11).

¹¹ AE, vol 39, p 310.

the church and ministry, points out that Luther “does not declare this particular species, the local pastorate, to be divinely instituted in contrast to other species of the public preaching ministry or the preaching of the Word, but that rather he declares this species to be divine together with the other species.”¹² Besides the office of pastor Luther includes under the preaching office and ministry of the Word and Sacraments “teachers, preachers, lectors, priests (whom men call chaplains), sacristans, schoolmasters, and whatever other work belongs to these offices and persons.”¹³ Prof. Schaller, likewise, says, “That this [i.e., the call of one or more into the public ministry when a group of Christians comes together] takes place is essential; how it takes place is incidental and depends on the circumstances of the congregation and on the opportunity.”¹⁴ More recently Prof. Carl Lawrenz wrote:

There is ...no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry The one public ministry of the gospel may assume various forms as circumstances demand. These forms need not embrace all the functions of the public ministry Through the Word the Holy Spirit guides the believers in their common faith to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation and need.¹⁵

Christians, then, can function as priests in two arenas, in their private lives and also, should the congregation of believers so desire, in some portion of the public ministry of the church. Just as we recognize that our called pastors and our called Christian day school teachers are in the public ministry of the church, we will want to recognize with thanksgiving that when properly qualified lay people are asked by the congregation to assist with some aspect of the ministry of the gospel in the name of and on behalf of the congregation, e.g., teaching Bible class or Sunday school, assisting with communion, visiting the sick, calling on the unchurched, organizing and promoting biblical stewardship, then they, too, are serving in the church’s public ministry.

If there is any church body that should be in the forefront of the utilization of lay ministry not just outside but also within the congregation, it should be the WELS with its biblical conviction that the public ministry need not be limited to one specific form, but may assume various forms as the circumstances dictate. This leads to the second main point we want to make in this essay:

II. The Special Work of Called Spiritual Leaders Is to Equip God’s People for Ministry

If, as the Scriptures declare, all Christians are priests with a ministry to perform, then a key task of spiritual leaders is to help prepare them to carry out their ministry.

St. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 4:1-13, especially verses 11-12. The chapter begins with a plea to preserve the unity that the Spirit gives:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (vv 1-2).

Paul then describes the marvelous Spirit-worked unity of the Body of Christ: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (vv 4-6).

¹² Pieper, August. “Luther’s Doctrine of Church and Ministry” (Translated and printed in the WLQ, 60:4 [Jan 1963], p 258).

¹³ From a sermon “On Keeping Children in School” (AE, vol 46, p 220).

¹⁴ op. cit., pp 50-51.

¹⁵ Lawrenz, Carl J. “The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry” (WLQ, 82:3 [Summer 1985], p 183). This essay was presented in 1985 to the Fort Wayne Theological Seminary’s Congress on the Lutheran Confessions as a summary of the WELS doctrines of church and ministry.

Having described the unity of the Body of Christ and the importance of making every effort to guard that unity, Paul goes on to speak about the diversity within that unity and the purpose for this diversity. “But to each one of us grace [Greek: charis] has been given as Christ apportioned it” (v 7).

This passage is a parallel to Romans 12:6: “We have different gifts [Greek: charismata], according to the grace [Greek: charis] given us,” and to 1 Corinthians 12:7: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” All three passages then give certain examples of the diverse gifts of grace within the one Body of Christ and explain their purpose. Here in the Ephesians passage Paul prefaces his description of these gifts and their purpose by reminding us of what Christ did in order to be able to bestow them upon the Church:

“When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” [What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe] (vv 8-10).

Paul here is freely quoting Psalm 68:18. In this Psalm the psalmist reviews some of God’s mighty acts on behalf of the people of Israel. He won victory after victory for them and gave them all they needed. And now Paul applies the Psalm one step further. Under inspiration he sees in it a picture of Christ as conqueror.

The same God who descended to Sinai, who led Israel through the wilderness and Canaan, and who ascended victoriously to Zion, has now descended to Bethlehem, walked through Galilee and Judea, gone to the cross to engage the enemies Satan, sin, and death in combat. Having overcome them, leading captive the very forces that once held men in captivity, he has ascended triumphantly to the heavenly Zion. As God gave gifts to Israel, so Christ gives spiritual gifts for the preservation and growth of his Church.¹⁶

Christ paid quite a price to be able to give these gifts to his Church. He humbled himself, descending all the way to the shameful death on the cross; he fought a bitter battle, enduring on the cross even the ultimate curse of sin, separation from God. But he was victorious, and in that victory he has distributed gifts to his Church.

The listing of gifts here differs somewhat from the listing in Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:7-11. There Paul speaks about special gifts given to people in the Body of Christ; here in Ephesians Paul speaks about people who are gifts to the Body, four groups in particular: “He [Christ] gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers” (v 11). We say four groups, even though it might appear as though there are five. The Greek construction, however, makes it clear that “pastors and teachers” are not two different categories in this listing, but one. Paul is talking about the “pastor/teacher.”¹⁷

Note carefully the purpose of these gifts of Christ to his Church: “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (v 12). The word translated “prepare” has in it the idea of making fit or suitable, restoring to a former condition, completing, putting in order, equipping. It is used of restoring walls that have been broken down (Ezr 4:12), of mending torn fishing nets (Mt 4:21), of restoring people who have sinned (Ga 6:1). All such uses have in them the idea of making things or people what they

¹⁶ McRae, William J. *The Dynamics of Spiritual Gifts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p 28.

¹⁷ Of these four groups, apostles and apparently also prophets are no longer present in the church today. The apostles were the special eyewitnesses of Jesus’ ministry and his special chosen Spirit-inspired spokesmen through whom the New Testament was written. Prophets, in the days before the completion of the New Testament, would from time to time receive messages from the Holy Spirit that were to be transmitted to the church. Evangelists, it appears, were those like Philip who brought the gospel to people for the first time. Philip is the only person in the New Testament expressly given the title of evangelist (Acts 21:8). He evangelized both large groups and at least one individual (Acts 8). Evangelists still exist as gifts of Christ to his Church today. The office of pastor/teacher is, it appears, the closest to that of our pastor today.

ought to be. That is Paul's point in this passage. Spiritual leaders are not called to do the work of the ministry by themselves. Their primary ministry, or service, in fact, is to get God's people ready for their ministries both in the world and in the church.

It is unfortunate that for years the full meaning of this passage was obscured by faulty punctuation in the King James Version, which translates Ephesians 4:11-12: "He gave some ... pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, etc." Note the comma between "saints" and "for," which makes it appear as though the pastor's call is to perfect the saints and to do the work of the ministry. The original Greek makes it clear that this is not the meaning of this verse. Years before our modern translations clarified this verse, Martin Luther caught its real meaning in his German translation in which he says that Christ gave to his Church such gifts as pastors and teachers "so that the saints might become prepared for the work of the ministry."¹⁸

That is the immediate purpose of Christ's gift of spiritual leaders to his Church: that the saints might become prepared and equipped for ministry. The ultimate purpose is "so that the body of Christ may be built up." Building up, internal and external growth, occurs when the spiritual leader prepares and equips the saints for ministry rather than seeks to carry out the whole ministry himself; for all of God's people are gifted and the use of these gifts is fundamental to the growth of the kingdom.

George Bernard Shaw once remarked, "Every profession is a conspiracy against the laity."¹⁹ In other words, people with specialized knowledge have a tendency to keep that knowledge to themselves and in that way to assure their indispensability. That is not at all what Paul envisions here. As John R. W. Stott puts it,

The New Testament concept of the pastor is not of a person who jealously guards all ministry in his own hands, and successfully squashes all lay initiatives, but of one who helps and encourages all God's people to discover, develop and exercise their gifts. His teaching and training are directed to this end, to enable the people of God to be a servant people, ministering actively but humbly according to their gifts Thus, instead of monopolizing all ministry himself, he actually multiplies ministries.²⁰

Multiplication is the principle that guided Jesus in his training of the Twelve. He preached the gospel of the kingdom to the multitudes and healed their diseases; but he spent special time with the Twelve, equipping them for their ministries. In fact, the closer Jesus came to his last days on earth, the less time he spent with the multitudes and the more time he gave to the Twelve; for it was through these men that his message would be carried on. They not only needed to be taught, but needed to become capable of teaching. In this way the message of the kingdom would be multiplied in ages to come.

The Apostle Paul followed the same principle of multiplication. As did Jesus, Paul preached to the multitudes; but he spent special time training certain co-workers such as Timothy and Titus. He tells Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tm 2:2). Four generations are mentioned here. Paul not only teaches Timothy, but teaches him how to teach others. Timothy will pass on the message to reliable men and will prepare them for their ministries so that they in turn will be qualified to teach others.

"He gave ... some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service." These words make it clear that equipping the saints for ministry is not merely a sideline but a primary reason for the existence of the public ministry. Christ instituted the public ministry that all the saints might become equipped for their ministries.

III. Equipping Begins with Discipling, Teaching God's People Everything Christ Commanded

¹⁸ Luther's German translation: dasz die Heiligen zugerichtet werden zum Werke des Amts.

¹⁹ As quoted in Stevens, op. cit., p 26.

²⁰ Stott, John R. W. *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), p 167.

“Equipping the Believers As Disciples” is our essay theme. We have spent some time talking about believers, reminding ourselves that, as a part of the universal priesthood, all believers are ministers with a ministry to perform. We have discussed the need to equip believers through spiritual leaders, who are the ascended Christ’s gifts to his Church, called to prepare God’s people for works of service. What remains is to focus in on equipping the believers as disciples.

What is a disciple? The word disciple comes from a Greek word which means “to learn.” A disciple, then, is a learner. In the ancient world a person would attach himself as a disciple to some expert to learn first-hand from that person. It was something like an apprenticeship. One might choose to become the disciple of an expert in a particular trade, of someone skilled in medicine, or of the leader of some philosophical school. Leading Jewish rabbis would have their disciples, people who chose to follow them and learn as much from them as they could. Paul, for example, in his early years, studied at the feet of the renowned Gamaliel.

In the Gospels and Acts “disciple” is a very common word, used about 260 times, occasionally in reference to disciples of John the Baptist, Moses or the Pharisees, but usually in reference to the disciples of Jesus. Martin Franzmann points out one big difference between Jesus’ disciples and disciples of philosophers, rabbis, etc.:

In rabbinical circles the initiative in discipleship lay with the disciple. “Take to yourself a teacher,” is the advice given to the aspiring disciple by a Jewish teacher of pre-Christian times. We have no record of a call issued by a Jewish rabbi to a disciple in all rabbinic literature What in Judaism was the pious duty of the disciple is here [in the Gospels] the sovereign act of the Master.²¹

“You did not chose me, but I chose you” (Jn 1:16), Jesus reminds his disciples in the Upper Room. We become disciples not by our own reason or strength, but by the Holy Spirit’s call through the gospel.

There is, however, a similarity between a disciple of Jesus and disciples of men in various other fields: The disciple of Jesus is also a learner. He is not a finished product. There is always something incomplete about him. The incompleteness is not in his justification. There are no half or three-quarter justified disciples of Jesus. When the Holy Spirit leads a person to call Jesus “Lord,” God credits to the individual’s account all of the perfect holiness of Jesus as well as Jesus’ full payment for his sins and declares the sinner not guilty.

What is unfinished, though, is the believer’s sanctification, his being conformed to the image of Christ in his life. While justification is instant and complete, sanctification is gradual and, in this life, incomplete. Justification is a once-and-for-all declaration; sanctification is a process. Equipping believers as disciples, then, has to do with helping them to grow in their life of sanctification.

In his “Great Commission” Jesus refers to both aspects of discipling people, making disciples and helping disciples to grow:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Mt 28:18-20).

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Jesus speaks as the risen and soon-to-be-ascended Lord, who is now “seated ... at God’s right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come” (Eph 1:20-21). The word he speaks, the commission he gives, bears the stamp of divine authority.

²¹ Franzmann, Martin H. *Follow Me: Discipleship According to St. Matthew* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), p 2.

The key word in this commission is not “go.” In the Greek “go” is a participle, “having gone”; although when it is used with an imperative, as here, it has somewhat the force of an imperative.²² It is not incorrect, therefore, to translate this Greek participle with “Go.” The key word of Jesus’ commission, though, is the verb “make disciples,” which in the Greek is just one word. Jesus’ followers are to “disciple” all nations. This word is an aorist imperative, which stresses the action of the verb. The emphasis of the aorist imperative is not on how many times or how frequently one does something, but simply on the doing of it.

The two participles that follow, “baptizing” and “teaching,” explain how disciples are made. People become disciples by baptism, through which they are brought into a saving relationship with the Triune God; people become disciples as they are taught the good news of Jesus Christ. The order of these participles indicates that the normal way by which people become disciples is through baptism, as R. C. Lenski writes:

Jesus sees beyond the first missionary stage of the gospel work when adults must be taught before baptism can be administered; he sees his church being established among the nations and children thus entering it in infancy, and this by means of baptism.²³

People become disciples through baptism or through teaching. But that is not to be the end of the matter. Jesus doesn’t say, “Make believers of all nations.” He says, “Make disciples of all nations.” There is a certain difference between the two words. The latter word includes and adds to the thought of the former. A disciple is a believer; but a disciple is also a learner. One’s learning doesn’t, or at least shouldn’t, end with baptism or after being taught the bare essentials of the Word of God.

The Great Commission, we note, goes farther than that. As Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all people, he enjoins them to teach people “to obey everything I [the one to whom all authority has been given] have commanded you.” The word translated as “obey” means to guard, to hold firmly to. What are Jesus’ disciples to guard, to hold firmly to? “Everything” Jesus commanded, his whole word. “If you hold to my teaching [literally, “continue in my word”],” says Jesus, “you are really my disciples” (Jn 8:31). This implies the need for teaching, of course, since one cannot hold firmly to that which he or she has not received.

From the Great Commission, then, the Church receives its charter not just for evangelizing all the nations of the earth but for discipling, or nurturing, those who have been evangelized. Those who have become disciples through the means of grace are to be given the opportunity to grow as disciples as they are taught everything Christ commanded.

“Everything” excludes nothing. Jesus spent three years teaching the Twelve, covering every area of the Christian life. “Come, follow me,” he invited them, “and I will make you fishers of men” (Mt 4:19). “He appointed twelve,” Mark tells us, “designating them apostles, that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach” (Mk 3:14). The order is significant. First they were to be with Jesus, as disciples learning from him. Then they were to go out to preach, to disciple people by being no less thorough in their teaching of others than Jesus had been with them.

Read through the four Gospels with this in mind. The Gospels are discipling, or teaching, instruments. Jesus taught his disciples, nurtured them throughout his ministry. They in turn, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reproduced what Jesus had taught them so that new disciples could learn everything Jesus taught and could grow as disciples. As much as Jesus taught, that is how much disciples should be taught.

The Apostle Paul sought to be such a discipler in his work. On his first missionary journey he made many disciples in the province of Galatia, in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. At the close of this journey Paul retraced his steps, “strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith” (Ac 14:22); and he also “appointed elders for them in each church” (Ac 14:23) who would continue with the nurturing, or discipling, of these new disciples. That wasn’t all. On his second missionary journey Paul visited these same congregations for the third time. As a result we are told that “the churches were strengthened in the faith” (Ac 16:5).

²² Carson, D. A. “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), p 595.

²³ Lenski, R. C. *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1943), p 1173.

On his third journey Paul stayed for three years in Ephesus. He spent most of that time teaching. Who was Paul's audience? Luke tells us: "He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus" (Ac 19:9). This was discipling work. As a result of these years of teaching, Paul could later tell the elders of the congregation at Ephesus, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27). With Jesus, Paul too disciplined people by teaching them "everything" Jesus had commanded.

Even when he did not have such a lengthy period of time: at a place, Paul crammed as much teaching as he possibly could into the number of days the Lord gave him. He fed the people, even brand-new believers, meat as well as milk. Though he may have spent as few as three weeks in Thessalonica, during that brief time he managed to find time to teach them not just the basic message of sin and grace, but even the doctrine of the Antichrist (2 Th 2).

Paul states his purpose in Colossians: "We proclaim him [Christ], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect [literally, "complete," "having reached the goal"] in Christ" (Col 1:28).

The power is Jesus', to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given; the program to make disciples of all nations is Jesus'; and likewise the promise is Jesus': "And surely I am with you always [literally, "the whole of every day"], to the very end of the age."

This promise alerts us to the fact that Jesus' commission to disciple all nations was not intended just for the original Twelve. As long as this "age" lasts, that is, until the end of history as we know it, until the day that Jesus returns, the Church's commission is to make and nurture disciples.

All of this has a direct bearing on the thrust of the ministries in our congregations. If, as we have seen, the purpose of called spiritual leaders such as pastors is to equip the saints, equipping starts with discipling, nurturing, teaching "the whole will of God." R. C. Halvarson is quoted as saying, "One might as well exhort a woman with a barren womb to have children as to exhort a sterile church to evangelize or respond to missions," or for that matter to respond to a call for spiritual action of any kind.

God's people must become something before they can be expected to do something. They must be growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pe 3:18). They must be becoming "mature," growing up toward "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

It is the Holy Spirit who carries out this nurturing work, and he does it through the Scriptures. In 2 Timothy 3 the Apostle Paul reminds Timothy and us that the God-breathed Scriptures are "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (vv 16-17). The Scriptures "thoroughly equip" disciples. Paul is using here a form of the same Greek word he used in Ephesians 4 where, as we saw, he states that Christ gives to his Church called spiritual leaders "to prepare God's people for works of service," to equip them for ministry (v 12). The way to get them ready, he tells Timothy, thoroughly equipped for anything God wants them to do, is through the Scriptures. That is why Paul urges Timothy to continue in what he had learned [i.e., the Word of God] (2 Tm 3:14) and to "preach the Word" (2 Tm 4:2), the same Word he had learned as a disciple from infancy on.

We are talking here about Christian education, certainly one of the historic strengths of our Synod. We think almost immediately of our system of Lutheran elementary schools and Lutheran high schools which provide opportunity for the discipling of a large percentage of our Synod's children and young people. We think of a more recent and welcome addition, Wisconsin Lutheran College, with its concern to prepare young Christian men and women who are able to "face life and deal with it through the application of Christian principles found in God's Word," students who zealous for and prepared for an "active role in the lay ministry opportunities within the WELS."²⁴

But a glaring weakness appears to be in the area of discipling of adults, of involving the adult members of our congregations in a systematic study of the Holy Scriptures that they might truly be taught everything

²⁴ 1987-88 Catalog of Wisconsin Lutheran College, pp 6, 52.

Christ commanded. As Elton Trueblood put it: “Education is too good to limit to the young Adult education is the big thing in the church. It is not a decoration, it is the centerpiece.”²⁵

Is the discipling of adults the centerpiece of our congregations? The most recent Statistical Report of the Synod indicates that barely 10% of our congregations’ confirmed members are involved in any kind of congregational Bible class. We need to be careful, of course, that we do not make more of these statistics than we should. They do not indicate the percentage of God’s people who are studying the Word privately and in the family circle. Also, as we are reminded in our Seminary’s pastoral theology textbook, *The Shepherd Under Christ*: “It must not be forgotten that the regular Sunday service does provide instruction in the Word of God for all age levels in the congregation. This is the primary means the church has employed through the centuries for the edification of its members, to build them up in knowledge, understanding, and faith.”²⁶

On the other hand, the fact that just 10% of the confirmed members of our congregations are involved in any kind of congregational Bible class should not be made to say too little. It hardly indicates that we have within our congregations eager disciples who long to be taught everything that Christ has commanded. Is it possible that many of our members equate confirmation with graduation? Do they feel that by the end of the 8th grade or by the time they finish high school they know it all? If so, a rethinking of our program of childhood Christian instruction is perhaps in order to help assure that our children and youth see their religious instruction as but the first phase of an exciting lifelong opportunity to grow as disciples.

The low figure of confirmed members involved in congregational Bible study programs perhaps also indicates that congregations are giving too low a priority to promoting the ongoing discipling of their members through study of the Word of God. How many congregations, for example, would be content if but 10% of their members participated in the annual stewardship program?

As a good first step toward getting our people into a systematic study of the Word, we suggest that our congregations give serious thought to beginning at the beginning: that they set the goal of getting all of their members to participate in a Bible information class that reviews the basic doctrines of the Scriptures. It was the experience of this essayist in his parish ministry, and others have had the same experience, that nothing increased zeal for Bible study more than this. When the basic Bible information class was taught as one of the Bible classes and was strongly promoted among the members, attendance at Bible class more than doubled. And, what is more significant, when the course was completed, virtually all of the new attendees continued in the class as eager students of the Word.

Life produces life. When believers are being equipped as disciples, when they are being led into the rich pastures of the Word, they will then welcome opportunities to be equipped for serving the Lord who is so graciously serving them with the Bread of Life. Equipping as stewards and evangelists flows directly out of being properly nourished and nurtured as disciples. Equipping begins with discipling, with nurturing. It then can proceed to training God’s disciplined people for ministry according to their gifts. Disciples will become disciplers; the fed will become the feeders—until Jesus comes. Then we will no longer need to grow toward maturity, but will have “attained to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

²⁵ As quoted in “Christianity Today” (May 23, 1980), p 20.

²⁶ Schuetze, Armin W. and Habeck, Irwin J. *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2nd ed., 1981), p 130.