

# Super Church Worker, Lousy Spouse

[Minnesota District Teachers' Conference Fall – 1981]

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To say the very least I was startled, if not appalled, when asked to grapple with the intriguing and unusual topic: *Super Church Worker, Lousy Spouse*. My first reaction was that my wife had been talking too much out of school regarding my record as a spouse. Even my best friends would have a difficult job of convincing anyone to give me a high rating in that department although my wife has done a remarkable job of covering up and coping with my deficiencies all these years, particularly when the children were growing up. To be perfectly honest I thought my past had caught up with me because I'm probably a classic example of a church worker, now retired, who, if not a lousy spouse by most women's standards, could certainly have improved on his record. A brief look at that record might be in order, but certainly not as a defense.

Relatively early in my ministry, in fact immediately following World War II, in addition to my parish responsibilities in Detroit, I took on time-consuming obligations as the Synod's liaison man to the federal government and the licensed agencies for war relief activities, involving considerable travel and time away from home and placing many of the home responsibilities on my wife's shoulders, including two very young children. These responsibilities continued and were compounded with others a few years later when a call as president of Michigan Lutheran Seminary took us to Saginaw. For the ensuing eight summers I did graduate work, first to earn a master's degree in history and English, and then to pursue the necessary courses in education to obtain a Michigan secondary teaching certificate. Because administrative demands also had to be met at the same time, this meant that when I did come home week-ends, virtually all waking hours were spent in the school office. My appearances at home were so rare that on one occasion our daughter, above five years old at the time, went around the neighborhood telling people: "Guess what! My daddy is coming home today and he's going to stay all night." I have never had anything hit me more between the eyes than that did, But it is a good example, I think, of what the program committee had in mind when it chose this topic. The letter accompanying the assignment stated: "From your perspective as a (former) pastor and teacher we would seek your insight into the delicate *situation of being dedicated appropriately to both the calling of the ministry and the obligations of a Christian family.*" What we are talking about, of course, is *the call as parent and the call as church worker. Both are God-given and really cannot be completely separated.*

In, spelling out the qualifications for married church workers, among other things Paul tells Timothy (I Timothy 3,4): "He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (NIV) Living Letters (The Paraphrased Epistles) treats that passage in this way- "He must have a well-behaved family, with children who obey quickly and quietly. For if a man can't make his own little family behave, how can he help the whole church?" Very bluntly, if a church worker is to have the kind of family and family life the Lord expects, he is going to have to put the proper kind of time and effort into it. He is not to be lackadaisical in this regard like old Eli but he is to be faithful like Abraham who showed his family what it meant to walk in the Lord's way and who, as head of the house, led his family to walk in those ways as well. Thus those engaged in church vocations are to maintain truly

Christian homes - homes which are outstanding examples of what Christian homes should be - homes which can be said to be adornments of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The words of L. Nelson Bell in writing on this subject underscore some very important truths (*Christianity Today*, 10/13/72): "Christian homes do not just happen. They are built by Christian men and women who sense something of the beauty, the wonder, and responsibilities involved ... Building a Christian home can prove to be a battle, for Satan hates and fights against the efforts of those who try to establish one. Only consecrated parents know the blood and sweat and tears involved - the hard work, courage, steadfastness, sleepless hours, wrestling in prayer. But they do not work alone. A Christian home means ... that Christ is the Lord of the home and that *He has preeminence in the lives of those who live there* (emphasis mine) ... A Christian home is built and maintained with faith in God - with love, unselfishness, consideration, patience, prayer, work, and praise ... A Christian home is held together by the cement of love - love of God, of each other, of other people..." If this is to be true of all Christian homes, dare it be any less true of the homes of those engaged in full-time church vocations? If your life and your family life as pastors and teachers do not testify fully to the reality of the faith you profess to believe and which you publicly teach, it will be counterproductive to all your other efforts.

In the home, the pastor or teacher cannot for any reason neglect or try to evade what are God-given responsibilities over against the children entrusted to his care and to the care of his wife. Hugh Thomson Kerr quotes from the Large Catechism in regard to this (*A Compend of Luther's Theology*, p. 224): "Parents should consider that they are under obligations to obey God and that, first of all, they are conscientiously and faithfully to discharge all duties of their office; not only to feed and provide for the temporal wants of their children ... but especially to train them to the honor and praise of God." Ewald Plass quotes from a wedding sermon of Luther on this responsibility (*This Is Luther*, p. 263): "There is nothing which will more surely earn hell for a man than the improper training of his children; and parents can perform no more damaging bit of work than to neglect their offspring... Therefore it is highly necessary that every married person ... consider the child nothing less than a precious, eternal treasure, entrusted to his protection by God so that the devil, the world, and the flesh do not steal and destroy it. For the child will be required from the parent on Judgment Day in a very strict reckoning . .

The family function which centers in the rearing of children requires a great deal from both parents. On the basis of biblical standards neither father nor mother can evade their responsibilities or put a disproportionate share of the responsibility on the other. And though it is a fact of life that the father is away from the home and from the spouse quite a little of the time, this is absolutely no excuse for a father's failure to face up squarely to the obligations and responsibilities which the Lord has laid out for him as father and family head. Ephesians 6,4, among other passages, reminds us of this: "You fathers also have your duties. You must not make your children resentful by your treatment of them. You must bring them up in Christian discipline and training." (Barclay Translation) The scope of the paper does not permit me to treat the complexities which arise when the wife is also expected to be a bread-winner, only to say that the husband has increasing responsibilities which he must stand ready to discharge without interference with his call as a pastor or teacher.

On the other side of the coin, God's Word also has something to say to the wife and mother, as in Titus 2, 3-5: the older women must live as if every act in life is an act of worship ... They must be teachers of all that is fine, and so train the younger women to love their husbands and their children, to be wise in the art of living, to be chaste, to be domesticated, to be kind, to

accept the authority of their own husbands. This is the way to ensure that no one can spread bad reports about the message of God.” (Barclay Translation)

It remains true, then, that husband and wife, each in his or her own sphere, will be required to give account one day of how each separately and together discharged their God-given responsibilities. There is ample warning in these words of Paul as recorded in I Timothy 5,8: “But if any provide not for his own, and especially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.”

It cannot be emphasized too much that to be the kind of husband or wife, the kind of good parent the Lord expects, does require considerable time and effort. *Christianity Today* pointed out in an editorial (11/21/75): “If God has given you a spouse and children, then He expects you to spend the time and effort necessary to have a good family life. If you are too busy for your family, then you are busier than God wants you to be, and you need to re-arrange your priorities.”

For the church worker (and for anyone else for that matter) there is no greater earthly blessing than a home in which Christ reigns and biblical standards are maintained. It is in this environment that the pastor and teacher can get the love and warmth they so need after dedication to their day’s work. In evaluating the home life of Martin Luther, Preserved Smith writes (as quoted by Ewald Plass in *This Is Luther*, p. 267): “Luther’s whole nature blossomed out in response to the warmth and sunshine of domestic life,” Plass himself points out (p. 262): “The Reformer was never too busy to find some time to devote to his children. He once remarked that children edified him more than he entertained them.” Rev. Hugo Handberg observes in a conference paper reproduced in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (July, 1981): “A teacher, a pastor ought to get mental, physical, and spiritual nourishment from a spouse. The Christian home of that servant of God ought not be a place where one’s work is criticized, that is, destructively, but rather a place of refuge and support, a place of rest and refreshment to which one can retire before returning to labors with the Word on the morrow.” Mary Bouma in writing about the important role of wife and mother has this to say: “By making our homes havens for our husbands, our children, and those around in need, we serve Christ in a way that is ours alone.”

But again, there is another side to the coin to which Pastor Handberg calls attention in the essay referred to. The spouse of the full time worker in the church “can become a victim of loneliness, a loneliness not at all understood by members of a congregation (and) ... often feels that she doesn’t have a close friend. She may live hundreds of miles from her relatives and friends. There is no one to whom she can bare her soul, flaws and all, and still be accepted ... It is probably a rare pastor (or teacher) who has the sensitivity to understand, day in and day out, his wife’s craving for a friend, someone with whom to share thoughts without having to remind herself, ‘I almost forgot, I’m the pastor’s (or teacher’s) wife.’ He must not forget that she is sealed off in certain ways from free and easy associations within the congregation or a body of school parents...” William H. Lazareth quotes Luther as saying (*Luther on the Christian Home*, p. 225): “Christian husbands are to look upon their wives with compassion and consideration as blessed instruments of God...” Pastors and teachers do well to take special note of this and particularly of the words found in I Peter 3,7: “in the same way, you husbands must live understandingly with your wives. You must treat them with special respect, for women are the weaker sex. They too, you must remember, are sharers with you in God’s gift of eternal life. For only if you live like that will there be no barrier between your prayers and God.” (Barclay Translation)

The foregoing should be borne in mind for still another reason. Too often those in church vocations, when they feel discouraged and give in to self-pity, are inclined to take out their frustrations at home, generally with the wife taking the brunt of it. They forget that the wife may not have been having an easy time of it either, that often she has been left to face and handle alone the problems of the day. All of this can develop into an unhealthy pattern and, to make matters worse, the church worker thereby betrays a woeful lack of understanding of who and what one should be as a minister, as a called servant of God. The absolute assurance that pastors and teachers are the servants of God, not by their own choosing, but by the choosing of God Himself, is the one fact that can rescue them from discouragement and from wallowing in self-pity when things don't go right. How can the church worker possibly overlook Christ's own words (John 15, 16): "Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain." Dr. R. Hilles hit the nail on the head when he said: "If being in 'full-time service' is your choice and not God's choice for you, you have already blown it." The other extreme, of course, is to become so heavenly-minded that you are of no earthly use, as someone once put it.

The complicating factor in all of this for the pastor and teacher is the call with its inherent demands. How to strike a proper balance, a God-pleasing balance, is exceedingly difficult and requires a tremendous amount of understanding and sanctified judgment because a call and the fulfillment of it are exceedingly serious matters.

The chief privilege and responsibility for anyone called into a church vocation is to know and to do the will of God. This has some very definite implications. Submitting to the will of God involves a terribly costly sacrifice for the Old Adam in all of us - the sacrifice of self, the sacrifice of our own wills. God exercises lordship over us only when our wills have been set aside and His will becomes our all. Christ Himself is the example. He said (Hebrews 10, 7): "Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God." His submission to the will of God in every respect and without exception is so very pronounced in the words of His Gethsemane prayer: "Nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done." Christ's entire life and work were in complete obedience to the Heavenly Father's will. He Himself was and is a living example of the divine truth that "he that doeth the will of God abideth forever." When it comes to doing the will of God, the compensation is always far greater than any loss, no matter what that loss may be. It is always so. And so it is that a prime characteristic in those called to serve must be a complete submission to the will of God, regardless of what it takes in time, effort, energy, and sacrifice. Thus, while we have a deep, God-given responsibility over against our families, we have a greater responsibility over against God and to what is involved in His call to serve. The first and great commandment is (Matthew 22,37-39): "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind ... And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." This very definitely establishes the ranking importance, but you don't do the one and leave the other undone. By its very nature that would be paradoxical. It is clear that your primary responsibility is to God and to His call. If you are tempted to think that this is an overstatement, then review for yourself the life of Abraham in the Old Testament. If you still think it is an overstatement, then remind yourself of Christ's calling of His disciples as recorded in Luke 5. When He had called James, John, and Peter, nothing could be more literal than the words: "They forsook all and followed Him." In the calling of all the disciples, there is nothing in the Scriptural accounts which would lead us to believe that they did not literally lay everything down and say good-bye to wishes, plans, dreams, and even comforts to follow Jesus.

They had been called in a special sense for a special purpose, just as you have been, and they heeded that call and were true to that call - disciples indeed.

If there is anyone in the whole of biblical history who was acutely aware of his call, its significance and implications, it is certainly the Apostle Paul. Striking and unusual though his conversion was, there is no question that it left him with a deep, lasting conviction that he had met Jesus Christ face to face, that he had been born of God, and that he was now “a new creature in Christ.” This positive conviction was the driving force in his life and ministry, and it should be no different in yours. Filled with the same conviction, your responses as a called worker can be no different than the response of Paul the day he met the Son of God: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” This, of course, leaves no room for the question which too often surfaces in our circles today: Is it in my call? What a destructive question that is! The amount of damage to the Lord’s cause professional church workers have wrought by this question defies description. Any called worker who seriously poses that question denies the very essence of the call. How is it possible to exclaim in one breath: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” and in the next breath ask: Is it in my call? The truly dedicated church worker will always be deeply concerned with the question: “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?”, not only in the specified areas of the call, but in any and all other areas where there is an opportunity to serve the best interests of His kingdom, assuming the necessary gifts and resources. As called people you, like Paul, will have but one watch-word: “for Christ’s sake.” It is this which provides the all-absorbing, the all-consuming, the all-constraining motivation to welcome opportunities to serve - whether these opportunities be small or great, whether they be exciting or tedious, whether they have high visibility or none at all. Called to serve as you are, you can render no service which is pleasing to God and has His blessing unless it is prompted by the pure and spontaneous love which comes from hearts redeemed. It all boils down to how deeply Christ is lodged within you - whether it is deep enough to make you perceptive like Paul as reflected in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (NIV)

The Lord has high expectations of you. You are able to measure up to these expectations because He made you His vessels, completely filled and flooded with Himself. This is what the Bible is talking about when it speaks of being “filled with all the fulness of God.” (Ephesians 3, 19). Furthermore, Ephesians 2, 10 reminds you that you “are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works., which God prepared in advance for (you) to do.” (NIV) In his commentary on Ephesians and particularly this passage, Ray C. Stedman observes: “Do you have any idea how many good works God has prepared for you? They are waiting for you to enter into, as you walk in faith and trust and dependence upon Christ. They are entered by faith, by trust in God Who has raised us up with Christ and made us to sit together with Him. The situations are there, ready and waiting for you to step into. This is what God has called you to, and as you do, you become a vivid display of the greatness and glory of God. . . This opens fantastic possibilities.”

Do you still have misgivings about measuring up as a called worker? If so, you can do nothing better than zero in on that glorious doxology found in Ephesians 3, 20-21: “Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.” There you have resources beyond compare and divine ability without limit. Therein lies the secret to fulfilling your calls. The only limit to the work you perform under your calls is the limit you yourself place on that work. Remember, as well, that throughout

Scripture the implications are clear that you are to consume yourself in your vocation, drawing freely on the indescribable divine resources always at your disposal, resources which are vastly more abundant than you can ask or think. Called workers generally like to think in terms of what they have accomplished and to make judgments accordingly. That is not the benchmark of success, not Scripturally anyway. God's benchmark is faithfulness, not how much is accomplished. Yes, faithfulness is always the criterion, thank God - faithfulness in the exercise of your gifts, faithfulness to your families, faithfulness to the parish you are called to serve, and, above all, faithfulness to the Lord Who has called you and placed you into that service.

With all that has now been said serving as the base, let's address that still nagging question: What is the priority? When that question was posed to Billy Graham, he responded: "The priority ought to be the home. Many churches are demanding too much time of their (workers); they shouldn't be at meetings seven nights a week and neither should the church members. There is no substitute for time at home." An editorial writer in a religious periodical states point-blank: "The church worker who repeatedly puts his duties to his congregation above his duties to spouse or children is acting contrary to the will of God." I agree with both of these men. I think they are on solid ground, for, when Scripture lists the qualifications for married church workers, it points to the home, contending that they can't do a good job in the church unless they first do a good job in the home. In this connection too I think that David Bryam, an air force chaplain, makes a keen observation: "It is possible for ministers and Christian workers to get so busy doing things for Christ, running Christ-like errands, that they fail to see that the spiritual life is being Christ-like. God has called us not just to do something but to be something ... to be what He wants." As I look back over my own professional life and my relationship with my family, I wonder how much of my time was devoted to "running Christ-like errands" at the expense of the real work of the church and at the expense of my family. You here today need to be concerned about this and to engage in some real measurement and evaluation. On the other hand, you also need to be careful not to use your family as a convenient excuse for inactivity and for not facing up to the clear responsibilities of your call. Furthermore, it is not a question of how much time you put in at home but rather a question of how you use that time when you are at home. Also, in this entire area there are no hard and fast rules. It was Luther's position, for example, that each wife's unique personality must be respected and that rules can't be offered applicable to every household. William H. Lazareth quotes Luther this way (Luther on the Christian Home, p. 225-226): "One cannot give rules in such matters. God requires only that every man act reasonably with his wife in keeping with her special needs ... Experience and practice provide the best advice in home life."

Luther's position suggests another point, and that is this. Not every pastor or teacher has the same capacity for work and the same physical resources, and not every wife in the home has the same ability to withstand stress and responsibility. These are factors which are part of the picture also, sometimes complicating it, but they must likewise be taken into consideration. You need to learn the extent of your own effectiveness as a church worker and the extent of the support required of you in your particular household, bearing in mind at the same time God's complete ability to fulfill His promises.

I can think of no more fitting conclusion to this discussion than the words of L. Nelson Bell (*Christianity Today*, 7/7/71): "Those singled out as heroes of faith in the Bible are all persons who kept their perspective clear and their priorities in order. They lived vigorous and useful lives. Many shouldered great responsibilities in dealing with others. All of them had to make hard choices and grave decisions. They had one thing in common: an unquestioning faith

in and obedience to God ... The degree to which we surrender all our being to God in simple faith and unquestioning obedience will determine our perspective on life and how we order our priorities.”