

Public Ministry—Private Lives???

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We who are gathered here are privileged and blessed beyond measure. Out of love which we neither sought or deserved, the God of heaven and earth has called each one of us into His heavenly Kingdom. He has, at the expense of the life and death of His one and only Son, erased every one of our ugly sins and banished them from His sight forever. He has in that same grace guaranteed us lives in which every threatening evil will be turned into something good and beneficial for us. He has assured us that after this life there will be a place for us in heaven, a place filled with joys and pleasures, beauties and majesty that we could not even begin to imagine at this point.

Our God has done more for us. He has given us the privilege of serving in that gracious work that Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1 calls, a “good work” (KJV) or a “noble task” (NIV), the work of the public ministry. He has allowed our hands to be His hands and our voices His voice as we bring to others the precious message of peace, hope, joy, forgiveness and eternal life given freely in Christ Jesus.

As we have exercised that privilege God has let us encounter first hand why it is such a “good work.” Think of some of the experiences you have had in your teaching ministry. To dry the tears of a penitent child with the message of Jesus’ forgiveness, to comfort a frightened child with the assurance that the Savior will watch over his sick mother or father, to instill in the hearts of little children that Jesus is with them everywhere and Jesus will take care of them, to listen to children sing about the Savior’s love in songs that we taught them, to hear children repeat and apply the words of Scripture that they learned in our classes, to be able to place the things of this world in the right perspective for them, to watch children grow spiritually as they grow physically, to see them begin to bring forth the fruits of faith in their interaction with one another, to be engaged in something every single day that prepares people for a thankful life of service and an eternity of bliss - these things and more make what we do a privilege. Ours is truly a “*good* work.”

But it is *work*, and like all work it has been made difficult because of sin and its bitter consequences. It’s pretty easy, isn’t it, for us to rattle off a list of the ways that the devil, the world and our own sinful flesh combine in their attempts to frustrate our enthusiasm and foil the effects of our Gospel ministry? The laziness of children, the criticism and lack of support from parents, the indifference of Boards and/or Church Councils, the backbiting of co-workers, the unrealistic demands of so many, the lack of time for so much, the internal struggles of faith, feelings of unworthiness and inferiority, guilt and loneliness, the weariness of body that we feel as our minds continue to write checks that our bodies simply cannot cash. All of these things and more can serve to drive the joy of the ministry from our hearts and threaten to drag our lives completely out of it. While the subject of this presentation will in a sense relate to many of the pressures mentioned above, it still focuses our attention on a still different pressure that can be used to negatively effect our ministries, namely, the fact that we live and serve in those ministries in the public eye. Let a few personal examples suffice to both illustrate the problem and the pressures that can be part and parcel of living and serving in a glass house:

- In our first parish we lived in a home which was located on the church property. In fact, the back door was less than thirty yards from the school doors and the back yard was the school playground. In the winter when the snow would drift outside the dining room window it was not uncommon for the children who came early to school to climb up on the snow pile outside the window and see what we were having for breakfast. On one occasion a parent called our home from the school building and asked my wife if I had remembered the opening devotion that morning since he had just seen me walking around the house in my T-shirt.
- After the Lord had blessed us with our third child, one of the women in the church came to see my wife and myself in the hospital where I was visiting her. Prior to leaving the hospital, in all seriousness, the woman said, “Pastor, with three children, don’t you think you should call it quits for awhile.”
- When our first three children were still very young we went out to dinner with a young woman in the congregation. She loved to be around our children and had befriended my wife through this difficult time. During the meal my wife excused herself to take a trip to the restroom. The young lady used her absence to inform me that I needed to speak privately to my wife because she just was not a very good disciplinarian for our children.
- On one occasion while I was at church conducting a Bible class a woman walked right into our home, walked into every room in the house and criticized my wife because she hadn’t made the beds. After this the woman walked into our living room and proceeded to have a nervous breakdown.

- On a Saturday morning our Board of Elders voted unanimously that I must take each Monday off. One man even volunteered to screen calls if necessary. The next Monday that same man called me at 6:35 a.m. and said he had found a “hot prospect” and wondered if I could come right then and meet with the woman.

How do we react to such situations? Are these just isolated incidents of rudeness or are they perhaps typical of a deeper problem? And if so, how do we handle it? Do we take the stance being promoted by some in our society who would divorce profession from personal life and say “What I do in my private life is none of your business?” Do we throw up our hands in despair and decide that we have to live with it or leave it? How do we balance the demands of our public life with the need for a private life? Do we even have a private life? These are the questions which we hope under God’s grace we will be able to address as we consider: **Public Ministry and Private Lives.**

1. In the Public Ministry to a Great Extent We Forfeit a Private Life

It is rather interesting to realize that as much as we speak of it, the Bible never speaks directly of a “public ministry.” “Public ministry” is simply terminology we use to distinguish our work from that service to Christ rendered by all believers. All believers serve our Savior privately as part of the universal priesthood, but those who have been called by the church serve Him publicly in the name of and on behalf of those who called them. It is the call which distinguishes the public ministry from the priesthood of all believers.

Both the priesthood of all believers and the public ministry originate in the call of Christ. Christ calls all Christians to the priesthood of believers when he calls them to faith through the gospel. Christ calls some Christians to public ministry through the call of the church.ⁱ

The words “public ministry” not only distinguish our service from the private service of all believers in Christ, they also serve as a reminder that our work by its very nature is a public work. We are called by our Savior through the Church to serve people. Our office does not exist in a vacuum. If it did both the title and role of the “public minister of the Gospel” would be meaningless. Whether it is dealing with members of our congregation, with our co-workers or with those in our community, the work of the public ministry is an interpersonal work involving contact with other people in our constant efforts to communicate the precious saving Gospel to them.

Because we have been called into the “public ministry” we are going to constantly be in the public eye. Paul knew that and wrote to Timothy words that apply to all those in the public ministry, “Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (I Timothy 4:12). People look at Christian pastors and teachers outside of the pulpit and classroom to see what they mean in them. It may sound trite because it has been said so often but it remains true that more teaching is caught than taught. Our actions speak louder than words and they effect our work. While by no means leaving pastors unscathed in his application of the Law to their ministry, August Pieper focuses on teachers and says,

Concerning the teachers in our schools this is a common complaint, that outside the classroom they do not seem to be concerned about their pupils. Our work in the ministry becomes for us a mere dutiful, official, mechanical routine, which is without a heart. Indifference! Our overload of work is doubtless a partial, but never a complete, excuse for this. Oh, what a pity! If we associate with our students only in an official capacity and in a heartless manner, only publicly and never privately, only in class and never in a social manner, will they ... behave differently? By our official work we have trained them only for official duties formally, and the disciple is not above his master.... Thereby it is not said that we teachers of the church are already spiritually dead, but that we are on the way to making of our official work a dead, external, mechanical, machine like

task which lacks the personal spiritual heart - a merely intellectual work according to acquired forms, according to an adopted routine, which has become a pattern, a habit, a custom with us.ⁱⁱ

Note that Pieper's comments emphasize more than the importance of our example, his words remind us that even when we are not acting in an "official" capacity, our example is still important. We have been called into the office of the public ministry. Our calls may differ with regard to scope and duration but as long as we hold that call we are in the office of the public ministry. We are in that office no matter where we are or what we are doing. To be specific, you are no less a minister of the Gospel on Saturday morning than on Monday morning, no less in July than in September, no less at home than at school, no less when out dining with friends than at a church picnic. The public ministry is not a job at which we punch in and punch out, we were called to a way of life, every aspect of which involves our service to the Savior by word and example. Paul underscores that truth when he spells out for Timothy the qualifications of those who are to serve as leaders in the church in 1 Timothy 3. We list here those qualifications of those who are called to be overseers:

If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 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?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

It is difficult to read Paul's words and not perceive that our entire life is on display in the public ministry. He speaks of positive qualifications (above reproach, monogamous, temperate, self-controlled, hospitable, gentle, family manager, and good reputation) reminding us once again that we can and do teach by our example. And he mentions negative qualifications (not given to drunkenness, not violent, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money) reminding us that we do not want to do anything which could undermine the effectiveness of the Gospel message we proclaim. What we do or don't do, what we say or don't say and when we say it, how we live or don't live, the way we manage our money, the way we use our time, the way we react to situations - all of this can serve either to enhance our ministry or to place a stumbling block in the way of it.

In these verses no qualifications are mentioned for the wife of the overseer. From this Habeck and Schuetze draw the conclusion "that essentially she is a private person and not directly involved in the public ministry of her husband."ⁱⁱⁱ We wholeheartedly agree with that observation. By virtue of being my spouse, my wife has not been called into my ministry. We hasten to add, however, that both she and my children cannot help but be and feel in the public eye. The way I am a father to my children and a husband to my wife is to provide a living paradigm for God's people to follow. It is to say to them "this is how God wants it done." Conversely, Paul reminds us that if I am not able to properly manage my household, I have revealed my inability to manage the household of God. The very fact that my relationship with my family is so important places them in the public eye.

2. The Strains of Living in the Public Eye

Sometimes we hear people in the public ministry talk about their "fishbowl existence." Like goldfish in a bowl those in the public ministry may feel hemmed in by watchful eyes. Perhaps it is more accurate, however, to speak of those in the public ministry as living in a glass house. In their book, *Life in a Glass House*, Cameron Lee and Jack Balswick make this distinction.

A fishbowl is like a cage in a zoo, the animal is held captive against his will and put on display for the entertainment of others. Far from being passive or unwitting pet, the minister moves into his house willingly as part of the expected role. Unlike a fishbowl, the house has doors, and the family may enter and exit as they wish.^{iv}

The point is that all of us knew or ought to have known to a certain degree that we were entering a life which would be public in nature. But what we perhaps did not know is the sorts of strains living in a glass house could place upon us and upon our families. Lee and Balswick go on to discuss one aspect of that strain when they say that in a glass house,

...when the doors are closed, family members can still share the vague discomfort of feeling as if the walls were transparent, that there is no firm sense of the boundary between inside and outside. Thus even in their private lives, clergy family members continue to live in the shadow of the expectations of members of the congregations.^v

The particular strain or pressure being discussed by Lee and Balswick is one which they call *intrusion*. By intrusion they mean that because of the lack of clearly defined boundaries between the public minister and those whom he serves, the public minister and his family may lose their privacy. There can be a literal physical intrusion as when a woman walks unannounced into one's home and proceeds to march all the way to the master bedroom. Or, there may be a psychological intrusion—an ever-present watchfulness whereby family members are monitored by the congregation. (See the front cover of the essay.)

It doesn't seem to matter what the family does, you feel that the congregation is watching every move you make. You may not do anything differently than some of the members of the congregation, but because you live in the parsonage, it sets you apart.^{vi}

Another strain often felt by those in the public ministry is what Lee and Balswick refer to as *idealization*.

Each member of a church congregation has some image of the role of the minister, the minister's spouse, and the minister's child. The images derive partly from theological and ideological beliefs and partly from experiences with other ministers in particular and the church and one's own family in general.... However, the images that we hold of our clergy tend to be idealized and larger than life. They must be more than human but less than God. The bottom line is that the special nature of the clergy family's roles too often requires some form of moral, spiritual, or emotional "differentness."^{vii}

To some degree all of us have experienced the strain of idealization. The expectations of the people whom we serve, especially marginal members of the congregation, do not always coincide with our understanding of our calling. Also, anyone in the public ministry for more than two decades knows that those expectations have changed.

Late in the 19th century our country was largely rural, where a relatively simple agrarian life was the rule of the day. Now... urbanization and specialization with all their complex and technological demands are in full swing. This change has influenced the church and the demands which impinge upon us. It has moved the church from a simple, relatively uncomplicated life where the demands upon us are fairly definite and direct, to a highly complex and scientific world where the demands upon us are intangible and sometimes highly intricate. In the face of this change we often find ourselves ill prepared, if not unprepared, to minister in an effective and competent way. We may even feel like amateurs in a world of professionals... We

often labor with a feeling of professional inadequacy, and if we are conscientious at all we long for increased knowledge and skill in order to meet the demands and expectations of our urbanized parishioners.^{viii}

This strain of idealization not only presses down upon the public minister, but also upon his family. His spouse may be expected to be at every function of the church while still serving as a faithful mother and wife and homemaker. People may watch the way she dresses and be bothered if she is too stylish or not stylish enough. People may expect her to know everything that is going on in the church and school but be bothered if she does. In the same way the appearance, behavior, courteousness (or lack thereof), and the dedication of the public minister's children is often evaluated in ways that Paul never intended when he spoke of managing one's home.

Our children resent other children referring to them as the "pastor's (teacher's) daughter" or "pastor's (teacher's) son." Children say, "Your dad must be so holy." They think that a [minister's] children are supposed to be and act perfect and holy. A person hates to disappoint them... but it isn't like that. We are no different than other families. Where does this idea originate? Children resent being placed on a pedestal.^{ix}

Our children, we add, often feel this pressure in reversal from their peers at school. Adults might expect them to be "holier than thou" and their classmates might criticize them for trying.

Depending on a variety of things we may find ourselves in a congregation where the great majority of people do not idealize us or demand that we be "larger than life." Many of God's people that we serve are spiritually mature people who have a Biblical view of us and of the public ministry. In fact, in my experience, I never cease to be amazed at how God's people so often let their Christian love cover a multitude of my sins and shortcomings. This, however, does not isolate us from suffering from idealization. At times the idealization comes from within.

...it is important to recognize that idealization and the resulting isolation are not simply forced by the congregation upon a clergy family. The minister and his family may themselves affirm a sense of calling in which they are to be set apart. In so doing they may support an image of specialness and a differentness of role.^x

An article by Pastor Victor Prange, "The Wonderful Work of The Ministry," stresses the same point.

We act as though we are or should be beyond the frailties of human existence. It seems to come to us as a surprise that we should become ill, that we should have doubts, that we should be tempted, that we should have discouragements, or that we should have personal or family problems. In regard to all of these limitations we tend to become troubled and distressed when they become a real and pressing part of our own existential world. We find it hard and very uncomfortable to accept our own clay-like existence.

A causal look at our daily schedule will indicate that we are pressured from the outside by a diverse multitude of tasks and responsibilities. A second and closer look will expose a second fact. The external pressure on us to perform a multiplicity of obligations is matched and re-enforced by an internal pressure, by a drive within us. That is to say, we generally are a very self-critical group of people. We demand a tremendous amount of ourselves in terms of time invested and results obtained. In a word, we tend to feel that we should succeed where others have failed.^{xi}

If the above paragraphs apply to us then it is also likely that we have in a similar way superimposed unrealistic demands on our spouse and family. If not by expecting them to match our drive, dedication and output for the church, then by expecting them to function normally and happily in our absence. Or perhaps by expecting them to be so spiritually strong that we can verbalize all of our frustrations and discouragements in their presence and still expect them to maintain a balanced God-pleasing view of God's people.

We would like to briefly mention one more strain that is often placed on those who live in the public ministry, and that is *isolation*. Some have called it *impoverishment*. According to Lee and Balswick:

Impoverishment refers to the restrictive nature of the boundary between the clergy family and the world beyond the congregation. Either for superficially pragmatic or more deeply emotional reasons, a clergy family may have few or no significant social ties outside the congregation.^{xii}

If the pressures of intrusion and idealization serve to isolate those in the public ministry from members in the congregation, impoverishment, according to Lee and Balswick, means that they are also cut off from meaningful contacts outside the congregation. Even if we have the desire for such contacts, our schedules rarely permit them, and even when the schedule might allow it we rarely move in social settings that foster contact with people outside the congregation. The result of intrusion, idealization and impoverishment is that those serving in the public ministry, and particularly their families can end up very lonely people. Probably the isolation is most felt by the minister's spouse as emphasized by Pastor Hugo Handberg who writes,

A ministerial spouse can become a victim of loneliness, a loneliness not at all understood by the members of the congregation (and) . . . often feels that she doesn't have a close friend. There is no one to whom she can bare her soul, flaws and all, and still be accepted.... It is probably a rare minister 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 minister's wife."^{xiii}

The isolation felt by those in the public ministry can be especially true for those serving in an outlying district such as ours. Many of us have our roots in the Midwest. If so, serving in the Arizona-California District means that we are cut off from social contacts with family and friends that we took for granted through our early years of life. As wonderful as we consider the telephone and e-mail to be, they are no substitute for the sort of interaction that comes with a face to face visit with mom and dad, a night out to dinner with old schoolmates, or a backyard barbecue with lifelong friends.

3. We Need a Private Life

We are all different people. We come from different backgrounds, grew up in different families and learned to know about the ministry from different congregations. We attended different schools and had different pastors, teachers and professors who influenced us. We have different gifts, different weaknesses and different strengths. We have different personalities, different spouses, different children and they all have different personalities too. We are different ages. We live in different geographical areas and serve in different congregations which are part of different communities. We have different responsibilities placed upon us. The people around us who also serve in the public ministry are different.

Because of these differences the pressures mentioned in the above section and our respective ability to deal with them will vary from place to place and from person to person. Regardless of our differences, however, and regardless of how we are able to cope with the pressures of the public ministry, there is one need that all of us have in common. Just because we are in the public ministry we all desperately need a private life.

Obviously, by private life we do not mean a "secret life" or a "different life" in which, free from the restraint of congregational observation, we can do as we please. In recent weeks we have heard much in the

media about the necessity of those in public office to have a private life and that what people do in their private lives should have no bearing upon our regard for them in their public office. We know, however, that such perverse thinking does not flow from Scripture and certainly does not apply to those in the public ministry. The idea that we can compartmentalize our lives being minister one minute and “one of the boys (girls)” the next just doesn’t fit with Paul’s words to Titus, “In *everything* set them an example by doing what is good.... so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.” (Titus 2:7). In a sermon on the pastor’s tensions, Professor Irwin Habeck gives words that are appropriate to those in both the pastoral and teaching ministry.

This living in the fear of the Lord, [that characterized the ministry of Paul], this desire to keep our lives, our every thought and word and act an open book before the Lord of which every page meets with His approval, ought to be characteristic also of us.... Our standards will be set for us entirely by God. He tells us to take heed to ourselves, and that means that we shall shudder at the possibility of doing anything that He forbids and shall avoid any attempt to rationalize any deviation from His standards by calling it relaxation, satisfying our need to let our hair down. On the other hand, we shall strain to obey His every command fully.^{xiv}

If there is a big gap between what we are out of the classroom and what we are in it, between our public life and our private life, it needs to be closed. Woe to the person of whom it could be said, “When he is in the classroom or the pulpit, we wish he would never leave it. When he is out of the classroom, we wish he would never enter it.”

3.1 Private Time for Study of God’s Word

But we do need private time, we need it first and foremost for study of God’s Word. Do you remember the story of Jesus walking on water recorded in Matthew 14? Do you remember Peter’s reaction when he realized that the one approaching them in the middle of the storm was none other than the Savior? Compulsive Peter wanted to be right out there with Jesus. “Lord, if it’s you, tell me to come to you on the water” (v. 28). Peter knew that if Jesus gave the word he would be able to do it, he would actually be able to stand right there out on the water next to Jesus. “Come,” Jesus said, and Peter did. He “got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus” (v.29). The Word of Jesus, like bedrock, supported Peter and enabled him to do the otherwise impossible.

So why did Peter become afraid? Why did he begin to sink? Why did Jesus have to come and rescue Him? It wasn’t that Jesus’ Word had failed, but Peter’s confidence in that Word did fail. He looked up and saw one awesome wave after another coming his way. He felt the water splashing at his feet. He felt the wind beating against his face. He found himself in a position which his reason told him just couldn’t be. To his mind, what he saw, what he felt and what he was experiencing seemed much more real than the Word of Jesus. And as surely, as surely, as he let go of his confidence in the Word of Jesus, just so surely did he begin to sink.

In the sinking feet of Peter we have a good parallel to the sinking feeling that overwhelms our hearts at times in the public ministry. The day to day pressures of living in the public eye are very real. The time-demands that people make of us, the expectations that they place on us, the intrusions they make into our lives, the loneliness and lack of close friendships—all of these things and more can seem much more real to us than the words of Jesus’ love and promises of Jesus’ help that buoyed us when we first stepped out of the good ship DMLC (or MLC or WLS) and began to walk on the stormy seas of the public ministry.

Do you remember those days? How long ago were they? Do we remember the joy in our hearts as we stood before our Lord and said in zeal and enthusiasm, “Here am I send me, send me!” Do you remember how zealous we were to take helpless sinners and point them to the cross? Do you remember how eager we were and how our hearts warmed at the thought of leading a little child into the safety and security of his Savior’s arms? We were taught about the challenges and demands of the public ministry, but still we wanted to go. And then through a call Jesus said, “Come,” and we began our walk in the public ministry. Through His Word Jesus had

prepared and equipped us for our work and we were confident that through His Word He would empower us. Let the winds of opposition from people's sinful nature blow into our faces. Let the waves of responsibilities bring whatever they might to threaten us, we would stay afloat

Nothing has basically changed since those days, except that maybe we have let the tangible troubles and pressures of the public ministry divert our attention away from the Word. As it was with Peter so it goes with us. When we concentrate on what we can see and touch, feel and experience, instead of on the Word of Jesus, it is then that the fears begin to overwhelm us, confidence evades us, zeal is sapped from our hearts and like Peter we begin to sink. Conversely, it is when we are resting firmly on the Words and promises of our God that the Holy Spirit supports us and equips us for our work.

How much time are we spending privately with the Word, privately as in devotionally? We are not talking about time spent in preparing lessons, or in seeking a new or novel approach to a Word of God class. We're not talking about devotions read to students or Bible Classes that we teach or attend. How much private time do we spend letting God speak to our hearts from the pages of Scripture?

In one of his *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis quotes the devil as saying, "It is funny how mortals always picture us as putting things into their minds: in reality our best work is done by keeping things out."^{xv} The devil wants us to forget things that we already know to be true. He wants us to forget how sinful and helpless and lost we are of ourselves, and how desperately each one of us needs the sustaining grace of God. He wants us to forget why we entered the public ministry and wherein the power of the public ministry lies. He wants us to forget the tremendous confidence that comes from knowing that our God is a God of never-failing love, a God who "will never leave you ... or forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5) who "is with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Satan wants us to forget that as we face difficulties in the public ministry "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Most of all the devil wants us to forget that God's grace is broad enough and deep enough and wide enough and high enough that it can even cover our sins, for "the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, purifies us from every sin" (I John 1:7).

If the devil can keep us from spending time in the Word, from dwelling on the marvels of God's grace and what that grace means for us personally, it will be easy for him to get us to forget how much those whom we serve need the Gospel and how powerful that Gospel can be in their lives also.

To retain this consciousness and awareness concerning the Christian ministry you will with all of us need to learn over and over from God's Word what is your own greatest need. Together with all of us, you through Word and Sacrament need to experience over and over again that the Gospel is able to fill that need.

Then also the other things that we beheld in the Apostle Paul will manifest themselves in your ministry. You will find willingness and strength to expend yourself; not to count your life precious in itself. You, too, will be filled with an urgent concern that the objectives of your entrusted ministry be accomplished through your ready labors. Then you, too, will not be ashamed of that Gospel, no matter who it is to whom you may have opportunity to proclaim it.^{xvi}

Every hardship, every trouble, every tough situation which the Gospel puts us in, gives us the opportunity to learn anew the power and the strength inherent in God's grace. When tough situations reveal our weaknesses and our dependency upon God, the grace of God never looks better or richer. When people problems have rubbed our nerves raw or when failed plans have cost us sleep or when we feel unappreciated or forsaken, we will retreat into the grace of God. And we will experience new energy as our faith affirms what God makes so glorious, his grace... his grace which caused God to send his Son to save us from our sins, a mercy completely unsolicited. We really do enjoy the glories of God's grace; our names are written in heaven.^{xvii}

Someone once said that nothing in all the world convinced him of the existence of the devil more than the fact that we deliberately do not do what we know will help us. Brothers and sisters in Christ, at the risk of oversimplification, we need to spend private time in the Word.

3.2 Private Time in Prayer

Hand in hand with the blessing of letting God speak to our hearts through the pages of His Word is the privilege of going to our God in prayer. The two go together. In the Word, our God comes to our hearts and assures us in wonderful ways that He is our heavenly Father. He comforts us with the knowledge that He has wrapped us up in the security blanket of His love in Christ and we are safe for time and for eternity no matter what threatens our lives or our ministries. Through prayer, we express our confidence in Him as our Heavenly Father. We crawl up on His lap and pour out the fears and frustrations, the pressures and problems, the trials and terrors, the sighs, sorrows and sins that weigh heavy on our hearts and hinder our work.

Jesus taught us to take private time for prayer, not just in the words of Matthew 6:6, “When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father,” but again and again Jesus stressed the value of a private prayer life by His own example. “Very early in the morning while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed” (Mark 1:35). On another occasion He “went up on a mountainside and to pray” (Mark 6:46). Luke tells us that the Savior “often withdrew to lonely places and prayed” (Luke 5:16). The night before he chose his twelve disciples He “went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God” (Luke 6:12). Remember how Jesus prayed for the church of all time in the upper room (John 17) and how later that night He prayed so earnestly in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-40)? Prayer was an integral part of the Savior’s life. In fact, one of the comforting assurances of the Gospel is that Jesus, as our ascended Savior still intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25).

Jesus’ disciples learned from him the importance of prayer. When other duties threatened to infringe on their ministry, the Apostles proposed that seven men be chosen to help with the administration of the distribution of food so that they could give their “attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4).

In his book, *Motivation for Ministry*, Pastor Nathan Pope devotes an entire chapter to the importance of prayer and meditation. He writes,

When the pastor [teacher] faces baffling problems, when he is painfully aware of his own inadequacy, when he is overwhelmed by the vastness of the responsibility that has been entrusted to him, he always needs to remember that, not only does he have the privilege of casting his concerns and cares upon the Lord (1 Peter 5:7), but also that all of the resources of his wise and powerful heavenly Father have been placed at his disposal in the promise that his prayer will be heard and answered. Great men of God like St. Paul and Luther were made what they were partly through their intense use of prayer and the Lord’s answer to their prayer.

The true soul-winners and soul-feeders have always felt their own utter insufficiency. They have been men of prayer; they have realized the need of regular closet hours; they have been much alone with God; they have constantly found refreshment, strength, peace, and joy in their still hours.

Whatever the hang-ups and the forces which seek to short circuit your prayer time with God, Jesus urges you to set them aside. He wants to hear from you on a regular basis. Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to show his disciples “that they should always pray and not give up” (Luke 18:1). And Paul says, “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying, for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18).

Jesus also wants to answer your requests. That we fail to pray “on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests” explains why perhaps we lack so many things and fail to see results. “You do not have, because you do not ask God” (James 4:20).

Moses never attended a workshop to steady him for forty years of ministerial trials and irritations, but he did spend forty days and nights privately with God (Exodus 24:18). Jesus never attended a symposium to prepare himself for the rigors of his public ministry, but he did pray away the nights on the Judean hills privately (Mark 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12). Paul never attended a seminar to equip him for world evangelism; he did go to Arabia to do something mysterious (Galatians 1:17) immediately after his conversion, consulting no man or apostle. Prayer is important. Prayer works. Yet how easy we find it to pass over this intangible solution to spiritual needs, because it seems too simplistic or because we lack the faith to carry it out! “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.” (James 5:16-18)^{xviii}

All of us believe in the power of prayer. We teach it to the children in our classrooms and those under our roof at home. Everyone of us have experienced its power many times over in our lives. Yet, still as we seek to cope with the pressures of the public ministry bearing down on us and our families it so often remains true of us also, “What peace we often forfeit, what needless pain we bear. All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer!”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to take more private time for prayer.

3.3 Private Time for Family

Spending private time in prayer and the study of God’s Word will not necessarily keep people from intruding into our lives. It will, however, enable us to cope with the intrusions that others make. A private devotional life will not necessarily keep others from having idealistic expectations of our families and us. It will, however, help us to view their unrealistic demands in the proper light. It will provide us with the strength to forgive when necessary and the patience and courage to instruct as we can. An active devotional life will also help us find more time for the much needed private time with our spouse and children. As God’s Word strengthens our confidence in the fact that it is His church and in His grace He will take care of it, as we learn more to take it to the Lord in prayer, we will learn more to appreciate the wonderful blessing of family that God has given us.

Is it really necessary for us to feel guilty for spending private time with our spouse and children? If it is true that as pastors and teachers our family lives are always on display, must that necessarily be something that burdens us? Can’t the Lord turn that too into a positive? God intended for the home to be a place of refuge where husbands, wives and children mutually support one another as they daily put into practice the love, forgiveness, understanding and encouragement they find in Him. In such an environment God’s people can only thrive and grow. Yet, our society has turned the home into a filling station from which we get up, gas up, and go as quickly as we can. Instead of spending time with one another, family members seem to become more and more like strangers who only pass in the dark or sometimes collide. Think of what a positive example and teaching tool our homes can become when we take time for our families.

Martin Luther did it. Anyone who is at all familiar with Luther’s life cannot help but marvel at the volume of work he was able to accomplish.

Luther prepared well for his lectures.... He was a bear for work. Already early in his career, he mentioned to a friend. “I need a couple of... secretaries, as I do almost nothing the live-long day but write letters.... I am a convent preacher, a reader at meals, am asked to deliver a sermon daily at the parish church, am district vicar,... business manager of our fish farm,... lecturer on St. Paul, assistant lecturer on the Psalter... You see how idle I am!”^{xix}

Yet listen to this description of the end of atypical day in the Luther household.

The evening meal was served at five o'clock. Before the meal Luther read a portion of the Bible, which was often discussed during the meal. The time was used for relaxation and good conversation.... Luther's whole nature blossomed out in response to the warm sunshine of domestic life. Often hours passed before the diners rose from the table. The meal concluded with the singing of the Latin responses of the church year, and of old religious songs and chorales.... The hours between the close of supper and bedtime were spent in playing with the children, or in singing, or in a game of chess. Luther loved to play the lute and to sing with the family. The whole family also enjoyed ninepins (which Luther is said to have invented), various card games, as well as chess.^{xx}

The Luther home was full of life and love. "It became, as is well attested in history, a model for the Christian parsonage."^{xxi} "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."^{xxii}

We may be inclined to say, "Yes, but that was then and this is now. Luther didn't have to put up with today's schedule of meetings and rapid pace of life. He didn't know what it was like to have people calling him all the time on the phone or dropping by uninvited." But would any of us seriously like to compare the pressures and work schedules in our ministry with those placed on the great reformer? Neither, apparently, could we compare to the intrusions he faced in home life.

The prince of Anhalt once warned a friend, "The house of Luther is occupied by a motley crowd of boys, students, girls, widows, old women and youngsters. For this reason there is much disturbance in the place and many regret it for the sake of the good man, the honorable father.... as the situation now stands... I would not advise your Grace to stop there." But Luther himself did not mind the activity. "King Solomon fed 24,000 people every day," he joked, "and all the poor relations from his father's house came to stay in the palace, just as happens here in the Black Monastery. That's why the king needed so many wives. They were all of them kept pretty busy."^{xxiii}

The key to Luther's successful efforts at private family life lies in other directions. Remember, this is the man who could drink beer with Melancthon with the confidence that even as they did so, God was using His Gospel to bring down the work of Satan. It was a faith strengthened by God's Word and confident of answered prayers that enabled Luther to bear the responsibilities and assume all roles God gave him in life. In that same confidence of faith Luther took time to enjoy his family.

Similarly, in the confidence of faith we ought to enjoy private time with our families. Not only do our families need us, we need our families. We need the diversion they bring into our lives, the companionship, the loyalty, the dedication and support. Our Christian homes can serve as a retreat from the pressures of our work. They can serve as training centers in which our spouse and children through their honesty and candor can keep us balanced and down to earth. They can be proving grounds in which the lessons from God's Word that we impart to others in the classroom are applied and lived.

If you are not yet married and are not specially blessed as the Apostle Paul was, then pray for a God-fearing spouse. Make it a fervent and faithful prayer. If you have been blessed by God with a God-fearing spouse, then you have been given something "worth far more than rubies" (Proverbs 31:10). Thank God for that spouse and regard her accordingly. If God in His infinite wisdom has blessed you with children you have been richly blessed. Cherish these blessings from God. Spend time with them. "If we are too busy for private time with our families then we are busier than God wants us to be, and you need to re-arrange your priorities."^{xxiv}

4. Balancing the Public and the Private

How do we arrange priorities in church work? Did you ever hear of the JOY formula? It goes *Jesus* first, *Others* second, and *You* last. It is intended to emphasize the importance of putting Christ and others before our own selfish concerns. This will then bring true JOY into our lives.

While you are contemplating such an approach to priorities, permit me to quote the reaction of one individual to it.

The serious flaw in this approach, however, is that it ranks the priorities of one's life in a one-two-three order. And while it may help us to see the values of life from a Biblical perspective, it can be an unrealistic approach to priorities and lead to a terrible imbalance. I readily admit I spent the first twenty-six years of my life in a state of such imbalance. God was first in my life, number one, all-consuming. In fact, I was so heavenly minded I was of very little earthly good. My roommates and family will attest to it.

Not only that, but my personal needs always seemed to get lost somewhere at the bottom of the pile. In my rush to be a leader, to make a difference, to meet the needs of others, to fulfill ministry goals, to complete jobs that could never really be completed, I ended up totally "burned-out." Not just "tired-out" or "stressed-out" but a charred, smoking ruin.

I lost interest and motivation. My heart was no longer in the things I was doing. My ability to focus and organize myself grew worse each day. I continually forgot things. My burnout was so great I would go to bed and cry myself to sleep without understanding why. A cloud of depression hung over my life. I had an increasing desire to escape, to make a change. All typical signs of burnout.^{xxv}

What the individual who wrote those words forgot, and later by the grace of God came to realize, is that we are also serving our Savior when we take private time for God to re-create us spiritually, emotionally and even physically. God did not create us as Energizer Rabbits who are able to keep on going and going and going and going. It was the Savior Himself who said to the disciples, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). He said it "because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat." We give glory to Him when we take private time with Him, with our families and friends so that He can use these blessings to revitalize us for our work.

When our Lord Jesus said, "Night is coming, when no one can work." (John 9:4), He was taking it for granted that His Father has given men a time for rest. There is no guilt involved in using that time.^{xxvi}

Rather than ranking priorities, a better approach is to see our Christian lives as a pie.

Fundamental to your pie is your relationship to God. Like the ingredients of milk and eggs in a cream pie, your relationship to God flows into every part of your life. But what about the different slices? Your pie is divided up into the priorities of your life. If you are wife and mother, part of the pie is your children. Part of it is your husband. Part, your interests, activities, work. Part, your friends. Then there is you, of course—your needs for sleep, sustenance, fellowship. However, this pie is not surrounded by a rigid edge. Instead, it is held together by a huge, super-strength rubber band. Sometimes the rubber band is pulled one way, sometimes it is pulled another. For example, when the baby is crying, your husband must wait. When you are sick, you cannot care for your family, do the laundry, or the cooking. The important thing at the moment is to get well.^{xxvii}

The beauty of this analogy is twofold. It assumes that our relationship with God, our love for the Lord, is motivating whatever we do, whether it be the time we spend directly in our work as public ministers or private

time for ourselves or with our families. If love for the Lord is driving our private time it will serve to counteract our old Adam which may lead us to use family time or private time as an excuse for inactivity or failure to assume the responsibilities of our calls. The second beauty of the pie analogy is that it allows for flexibility in our priorities depending upon different situations and circumstances in our lives. Luther is often quoted as saying that the more work he had the more time he needed for prayer. Likewise in certain circumstances private time with our children or spouse may become a higher priority.

Also, in this 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, "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."^{xxviii}

Something else that might help us better balance the need for private time with the demands of our public ministry is learning to delegate.

Two things need to happen. Called workers in the public ministry need to learn to share more responsibility with members of their congregations, and members of congregation need to learn to shoulder more responsibility as lay ministers of Christ . . . In the church, delegating involves discipling. It involves pastors and teachers "preparing God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:12). Good... leadership involves not doing things others can do as well or better. Wives of pastors and teachers who have learned that truth experience less frustration than wives whose husbands have yet to learn that.

Congregations need to realize that in healthy churches members are participators, not spectators. Churches in which a sense of "ownership" prevails, churches in which planning is done to involved the total membership of the congregation in the congregation's mission are usually churches which do best at relieving pastors and teachers of excessive burdens, leaving them freer to be the husbands and fathers God expects them to be.

The bottom line is this: more involvement by more members in the work of the church spells relief for pastors and teachers, their wives and their children.^{xxix}

One final thought. The time we spend at a conference such as this one is public time but it is also private time. It is beneficial private time away from our congregations and classrooms. It is private time which our wonderful Savior can and does use to revitalize us for our work. What a blessing we have in our Synod that we can gather together for mutual edification through the study of the Word and administration of the sacraments. What a blessing that we can gather with people with whom we share such a special fellowship. Look around you in this room. You see people who share your goals, your purpose, your ups, your downs, your joys, your sorrows. When the life in a glass house starts to overwhelm us and our family members, do we take advantage of the very special brothers and sisters that God has given us in our co-workers? We are not friendless. By the privilege of our profession and the church body in which we practice it we have more close friends than most people will cultivate in a lifetime. Cherish those friendships. Use those friendships. They will only serve to benefit our public ministry.

Yes, we are in the public ministry, a very public ministry. But to equip us for that ministry God wants us to have a private life. A life nourished by His life-giving word, supported by prayer, and blessed richly with family and friends. How else can we respond to our gracious God but to say with the hymn writer:

Lord of the living harvest that ripens o'er the plain,
Where angels soon will gather their sheaves of golden grain,
Accept our hands to labor, our hearts to trust and love,

And be with us to hasten Your kingdom from above.

As laborers in Your vineyard, Lord, give us work to do,
Content to bear the burden of weary days for you,
To ask no other wages when you will call us home
Than to have shared the labor that makes your kingdom come.

Be with us, God the Father, be with us God the Son
And God the Holy Spirit, Most blessed Three in One.
Make us Your faithful servants you rightly to adore,
And fill us with your blessing both now and evermore.

End Notes

ⁱ John Brug, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Ministry,” *WLQ*, Vol. 91, No. 2, p. 124

ⁱⁱ August Pieper, “The True Reconstruction of The Church,” *The Wauwautosa Theology*, Vol. III, p. 312.

ⁱⁱⁱ Habeck and Schuteze, *Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 8

^{iv} Lee and Balswick, *Life in a Glass House*, pp. 74-75.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 75.

^{vi} Anonymous pastor’s wife as quoted by Ron Ash in “The Problems Facing a Pastor’s Wife Today,” *WLQ*, Vol. 81, No. 1, p. 32.

^{vii} Lee and Balswick, *op. cit.*, pp. 69-70.

^{viii} Leroy Aden, “The Minister’s Struggle with Professional Adequacy,” *Pastor Psychology*, March 1969, pp. 10-11, as quoted by Pastor Victor Prange in “The Wonderful Work of the Ministry,” *WLQ*, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 25.

^{ix} Anonymous pastor’s wife, as quoted by Ron Ash, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

^x Lee and Balswick, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71

^{xi} Victor Prange, “The Wonderful Work of the Ministry,” *WLQ*, Vol. 69, No. 1, p. 26.

^{xii} Lee and Balswick, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

^{xiii} Hugo Handberg, “How Involved Should a Spouse be in a Spouse’s Ministry?,” *WLQ*, Vol. 78, No. 3, p. 221.

^{xiv} Irwin Habeck, “A Pastor’s Tensions,” *WLQ*, Vol. 70, No. 3, p. 55.

^{xv} C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, p. 20.

^{xvi} Carl Lawrenz, “The Christian Ministry—A Privileged Task,” *WLQ*, Vol. 66, No. 3, p. 152.

^{xvii} Nathan R. Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, p. 232.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, pp. 203-210.

^{xix} Arnold J. Koelpin, “Luther, as Father and Teacher,” essay delivered at Dr. Martin Luther College, November 10, 1976, p. 11.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, pp 7-8.

^{xxi} This assessment comes from an article by Richard Friedenthal, “*Das Evangelische Pfarrhaus im Deutschen Kulturleben*,” found in the magazine *Luther* from the Luthergesellschaft, 1972, I, pp. 1-15.

^{xxii} Ewald Plass, *This is Luther*, p. 262.

^{xxiii} Arnold J. Koelpin, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

^{xxiv} *Christianity Today* editorial, vol. XX, No. 4, p. 33.

^{xxv} Mary Farrar, *Choices*, pp. 135-136.

^{xxvi} Irwin Habeck, “A Pastor’s Conscience—Reflections on 1 Timothy 1:19,” *WLQ*, Vol. 69, No. 4, p. 235.

^{xxvii} Mary Farrar, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

^{xxviii} Conrad Frey, “Super Church Worker, Lousy Spouse,” essay delivered at the Minnesota District Teacher’s Convention, Fall 1981, p. 7.

^{xxix} Joel Gerlach, “Time in—Time Out,” *The Northwestern Lutheran*, May 1, 1985, p. 145.