

Our Calling: Christian Vocation and The Ministry of the Gospel

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[Convention Essay: 60th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod Assembled at Michigan Lutheran Seminary, Saginaw, Michigan. July 27-31 2009.]

When God speaks, he opens his mouth wide. The voice of God calling out into this world never leaves its object unchanged. It creates and destroys, invites and hardens, thunders and whispers. God does not speak needlessly or lightly. When God speaks, he opens his mouth wide.¹ The call of God affects our lives, our world, our whole destiny. We are gathered under the theme: *Christ's Love, Our Calling*, and today we will consider the second half, when God opens his mouth wide—Our Calling.

Our Calling has a purpose

"What is the meaning of life?" Man yearns for life to make sense and have a purpose. We are not beasts content to eat and sleep, oblivious of our connection to the world. We are thinking humans who long for relevancy. "I want my life to matter." When a man's life has purpose, all of his activities have meaning because they contribute to his life's goal. Life without purpose or goal drifts irrelevantly like an unmoored ship. Our calling from God answers man's need for meaning by saying, "Your life matters, because I have a purpose for you. I am inviting you to be part of my kingdom and all that it entails."

The word "call" is used many times in the Bible. In the Old Testament the word is קָרָא and in the New Testament, καλέω. Both of these words mean "to call, to address someone." However, their usage in the Bible carries deeper significance.

In the Old Testament קָרָא can mean to name something, and in that case, naming is an exercise of sovereignty over the creature named. Adam displayed his dominion as crown of creation when he named the animals.² But the use of the word קָרָא when giving names goes beyond affixing a label. Especially in the Old Testament, a name was seen as something real—being called something was nearly the equivalent of being it. This Hebraism can be seen in the New Testament as well: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"³ Calling, then, is more than a verbal address or labeling. When God calls, it involves purpose.

At the beginning of time, God created the heavens and the earth, but darkness covered a world that was formless and empty. Yet the Bible has that wonderful sentence of pending grace when it tells us the Life-giving Spirit hovered over the waters, waiting to give life to this new world. Then God opened his mouth wide and said, "Let there be light," and suddenly, piercing the darkness, light came screaming out of the mouth of God at 186,000 miles per second, filling the world with its brilliance. God saw that the light he had made was good—of itself, essentially good.

But what was the function of this light? It didn't have a purpose, a function, until God opened his mouth wide once more and called⁴ the light. God called the light, "day." And in his call, God did more than name the light; he gave the light its purpose: to be Day. To be the time for work and play, not for sleep. To be the time for growing and going, not for dormancy. Suddenly, the light had meaning and purpose in the world, and immediately it fulfilled the purpose for which God had called it: And there was evening, and there was morning—the first Day.

¹ Volker Stolle. *The Church Comes From All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*. K. D. Schulz, & D. Thies, Trans., (St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2003), 28.

² Gen 2:19: וּבָלַע אֱשֶׁר יִקְרָא לוֹ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ:

³ 1 Jn 3:1

⁴ וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם

The Biblical words for call, קָרָא and καλέω, are more than an address, or a vocalized expression when God calls. There is purpose attached to this speaking. Those words are translated in various ways: to name, to call, to invite, to call to a task, to summon to accounting or judgment or fellowship. But in each case, there is a goal, a function, a calling *to something*.

While the Bible uses the word "call" many times, the word that is the subject of our essay, "calling," finds much more restricted use. The word κλήσις, calling, is used eleven times in the New Testament. The one doing the calling is always God; the meaning, an invitation to enter the kingdom of God.⁵ When God does the calling, a good translation is often "to invite." An invitation is a calling with a purpose in mind. The invitation goes out to the invited and calls them to be part of the event or function or role. The invitation changes the status of the person from "uninvited" to "invited;" it assigns them a purpose.

Consider the Parable of the Wedding banquet. The king prepares a banquet and sends his servants to invite the invited guests to come.⁶ When they refused, the invitation went out to the highways and byways. The purpose behind this call was to fill the wedding banquet with guests. The invitation to "anyone you can find" changed the status of those called from "uninvited" to "invited by the king." It was an invitation to participate in a new status, a new role, a new reality—that of being a guest of the king. Their new status as invited guests of the king changes their lives: why they are traveling; how they prepare for the feast; the happiness they anticipate; the purpose of their actions—all are transformed by the calling of the king.

When God calls us, he lays hold of us by his means and for his purposes. He invites us to be what he intends. The call of God in Scripture is broad and deep, encompassing many aspects of our life of faith. Today, we will consider three aspects of Our Calling from God—our calling before God, our calling before the world, and our calling for the world. Our Calling from God is to be his Child, to be his Mask, and to be his Church.

Our calling to be the children of God

Picture the moment God finished forming man, dust from the ground, and woman, from the rib of man. As they stood before their God and Maker, they stood as the pinnacle of creation, the crown of the kingdom, made in the very image of God. Before the creation of man, God looked at the world and called it "good." This good creation, however, was incomplete without its crown. When he looked at man and woman standing before him in the midst of his creation, God now called it "very good."

No wonder, God said, "Behold! It was very good." Here was God's child: Man as God intended—in communion with his Maker, in control of himself and his world, loving all that was around him with God's love, an heir of all God's blessings, to be enjoyed forever and ever.

But somehow, this was not enough. Communion with God failed to satisfy him fully. He wanted more. He listened to the hissing temptations that he could be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil. He believed the lie that God was holding out on him. The child of God chose to become a child of wrath, believing in the half-truths of sin rather than his Sovereign LORD.

By the Word of his mouth, God had made a perfect world of love and peace. Without even speaking a word, man perfectly ruined it. Sin promises, but fails to deliver. Children of God who knew only good, wanted to see what the difference was. The knowledge of the difference between good and evil was underscored when they held their dead child in their arms, killed by his brother. Sin subjected all that God had made to the bondage of death and depravity.

Man wanted to be like God, but his sin made him exactly the opposite. From the perfect man, walking in communion with God, he became the leaf-covered coward scurrying behind the trees of the garden. Everything changed: his relationship to God, to his spouse, even to his world. The very garden, given as a great blessing to the man, he now sinfully exploited as he tried foolishly, helplessly, to hide from his God. His fall complete, Man found himself surrounded by sin in his new life east of Eden.

However, God did not send him from the Garden empty handed. Because God never intended man to live like this. Adam left with a promise.

⁵ With the possible exception of κλήσει 1 Cor 7:20. Cf. Part 2: To be the masks of God.

⁶ *Lit.* "to call the ones who had been called" καλέσαι τοὺς κεκλημένους Matthew 22:3.

The Lutheran Reformers liked to use the word "promise" for the gospel. The term for gospel in the New Testament, εὐαγγέλιον, means "good news." But the Lutheran Reformers' liked to use "promise" because it explains the nature of this gospel a little more clearly than "good news." The gospel is not merely the opposite of bad news, just as faith is not merely knowledge of historical events. The gospel is the promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ's sake.⁷

The temptation Satan offered, to be like God, was untenable. But look at the promise! The promise seems equally untenable. It turns the action of Adam on its head and invites us to believe foolishness: so that we can be like God—*God became like us*. He became a second Adam to do what the first couldn't. The call of God invites us to believe that the impossible payment has been made—that God's own Son suffered and died for sinful man. When he did, God effected a joyous exchange⁸ "It follows that everything is held in common ... the believing soul can boast of and glory in whatever Christ has as though it were its own, and whatever the soul has Christ claims as his own."⁹ The call invites us to believe that on account of that exchange, sinners are made saints, beggars are placed on thrones, and the very thing that man tried to get by sin, was in fact won by the Son—namely, we will be like God.

The primary meaning of our calling in Scripture is the promise of God to adoption as his children through faith in the promises of Christ's work. Therefore, our calling is not primarily about what we do, but about what God gives us.

What does God intend to give us? Our calling is God inviting us to be all that he has planned for us to be as his children. God's call is the promise that invites us to be his children again—children that are like his Son. "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."¹⁰ God's call has a purpose and a goal: to make us his sons—sons that are just like Jesus.

All that characterized the history of the Son on earth and all that marks him as the Son at God's right hand., all this is destined, to be theirs: the perfect manhood. Of the Son, the free and, complete obedience of the Son, the full communion with the Father that the Son enjoyed, the high enthronement at the right hand of the Father, and the joy of free obeisance to the Father ... The Son retains his primary place and preeminence; it is the sheer condescension of the First-born that makes us brothers of the Only-born, that makes us share in a glory which is, rightly, His alone.¹¹

All this God meant in the word "gospel." More than good news, it is the promise of God inviting us to be his children again—a promise to make us like the first Adam had been, and the Second Adam is.

A promise by definition looks for a response; a promise is made that someone else might believe it, trust in it, and rely on it. Any promise seeks faith on the part of the person to whom the promise is given. The marriage promise of a groom, seeks faith on the part of the bride, that she might believe his vow of fidelity.

In the promise of the gospel, however, trust in the promise is not accomplished by the hearer, but by God. It is a promise with the power to create the very trust that it seeks. Thus, faith is "believing in God's promise" and "to want and receive the offered promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification."¹²

At its heart then, our calling is the efficacious invitation, proclaimed by the gospel, to participate in the community of salvation.¹³

⁷ Apology IV, 43, *Concordia*.

⁸ *Frölicher Wechsel* – Luther.

⁹ "The Freedom of a Christian, 1520," *LW* 31:351.

¹⁰ Ro 8:28-30

¹¹ Martin H. Franzmann. *Romans*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 154.

¹² Apology IV, 48, *Concordia*.

¹³ Abraham Calov as quoted by Kenneth Appold, *Abraham Calov's Doctrine of Vocatio in Its Systematic Context*. (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 132.

Our Calling is free

Our calling from God is unconditionally one-sided; nothing in us can or did merit God's call. Christ taught the free nature of our calling in the parable of the wedding banquet referenced above. The call went out to the streets, to the good and the bad. The invitation costs nothing; in fact, the guests have nothing to offer, nothing that makes them worthy of the invitation-nothing but the purpose God had for us. As Paul said, "God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life-not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."¹⁴

God's purpose was simple: he wanted to restore creation and its crown to the perfection with which he made it. In grace he wanted to give the world a free invitation to sonship through the work of Christ; he gave a promise that the debt is paid, the work is done, and heaven stands open. "The human race is truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ. By his faultless obedience, suffering and death, Christ merited for us the righteousness that helps us before God and also merits eternal life."¹⁵

All of this God gives freely to mankind. We are invited to come and buy and feast in the kingdom of God without money and without cost.¹⁶ Though we had nothing to offer to God, God had love in overflowing abundance. As Luther said, "God's love does not find the object it can love; God's love creates it."¹⁷

Our Calling is through means

God chose the way his love would create that object: the gospel promise would be the tool of the Holy Spirit to work faith. God does not call to Faith without means, but has ordained that he will ordinarily call through his Word. "Faith comes from hearing the message..."¹⁸ Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name.¹⁹ God sends ambassadors and messengers to bring his call near to man.²⁰

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God in those who hear the gospel.²¹

Lutherans rely on the means of grace in our outreach and inreach because the Word and sacraments are the only tools the Holy Spirit has given his Church to open the heart of man. No program, method, or personality can work faith in sinful man's heart-only the gospel.

All this Luther so succinctly summarized when he wrote, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel."²²

Our Calling is universal

To whom does this call apply? Everyone. The invitation of God is meant for every man, woman, and child. All are to be called. The call of God is universal because the preaching of repentance is universal, the promise of the gospel is universal, and Christ commands the Church to offer the promise to all.

God's universal call to the world is sincere: He means it. He wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Yes, the Bible teaches that God elects to salvation and those he predestines, he also calls. Though the Bible says that the only the elect will be saved, that does not change the sincerity or universality of God's call.²³ This call of God isn't smoke and mirrors, sincere for some and not for others. The Formula of Concord says, "We should not think of this call of God which is made through the preaching of the

¹⁴ 2 Ti 1:8-9

¹⁵ FC SD XI, 15, *Concordia*.

¹⁶ Isaiah 55:1ff.

¹⁷ Quoted in Franzmann, 209.

¹⁸ Romans 10:17

¹⁹ Luke 24:47

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20, Matthew 22:2ff

²¹ AC V,1.

²² Luther's explanation to the Third Article.

²³ Here is an encouragement to read Article XI of the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration. It is simply the best explanation of the doctrine of election ever written.

Word, a juggler's act."²⁴ The idea here is that God's call is not deceptive,²⁵ a real call for the elect but an insincere call for those who ultimately will not believe. No, this is a universal, sincere call by which God reveals his will for all people—that they be saved.

Our Calling is efficacious

This invitation to believe the promised grace is the call of God to be his child. Mankind had fallen so far that we could not even believe this promise; we could not even accept this invitation. Our reason was blind, our hearts were darkened, our souls were hostile. "I believe that I cannot, by my own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him."²⁶ The only answer possible for people like us? God must act.

The call of God doesn't look for a reaction, but induces a response. The Holy Ghost has called me by the gospel and enlightened me. How does he do that? He kills me. Sinners must die, says Romans 6:23, either eternally or baptismally.²⁷ He kills me so that he can bring me back to life. To the sinful flesh he speaks harshest law and to the contrite heart, the sweetest gospel. The law puts the sinner to death that the gospel might resurrect him to new life and to faith.

God's call is always efficacious because it is the gospel: it is living and active; it is the power of God; it never returns to him empty. This call has the power to open the heart of man and reclaim it for God. It is able to make us wise for salvation.

However, while the call is efficacious, that does not mean that everyone who hears the Word comes to faith. The Holy Spirit works faith when and where it pleases God. The result is that when the call of God goes forth, some believe, others do not. As Luke records in Acts, "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the Word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."²⁸

Why then, does Jesus say, "Many are called, but few are chosen?" If the call is universal and efficacious, why are only a few saved, compared to the many called? If God truly wants all men to be saved, and his call is sincere and induces a response in man, then why doesn't Jesus say that all are called and all are chosen?

God's call, like the word "invitation," implies an offer that can be refused. The calling is efficacious, but it is not irresistible. The call is efficacious, not because everyone called ends up in heaven, but because the Word leads them efficaciously. Everyone called receives the full effect of that call, and the effect is the same for everyone. The people that don't end up in heaven have received the same call, but they rejected the verbal offer. The cause of the "few chosen" lies not in an insincerity of God's call, but the perverse human will to reject it or pervert it.

Election is simply the eternal purpose and plan of God to do for the believer what, according to the Third Article, God actually does in life to bring him to heaven. As Paul says, "from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."²⁹ Out of pure grace we have been elected in Christ to eternal life. Christ promised it, certified it with an oath, and sealed it with the Sacraments.

The result of our calling

Sonship. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."³⁰ We are children of God. But more than that, we are sons-heirs of the kingdom of our Father. Truly, all we deserved was to remain the sons of Adam, for we were born in his sin, followed his path, and by nature were creatures of wrath. But the love of God broke through the darkness of sin and called us to sonship by means of a promise: My son became like you, so that you can be like him.

²⁴ FC XI, 29, *Concordia*.

²⁵ The Latin text has *simulatam et fucatam*, feigned and disguised. The German, *Und solchen Beruf Gottes...sollen wir für kein Spiegelfechten halten*, lit. mirror-fencing, jugglery, acts of deception.

²⁶ Luther's explanation to the Third Article.

²⁷ Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 97.

²⁸ Ac 13:48

²⁹ 2 Th 2:13-14

³⁰ Galatians 3:26

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"³¹

Our calling to be the mask of God

It was nearly 3:00 in the morning when he answered his last question. Justus Jonas, sensing the end was near, asked, "Reverend Father, will you die steadfast in Christ and the doctrines you have preached?" "Ja!" cried that loud voice for the last time. Then, on February 18, 1546, a most improbable thing happened. The professor condemned to the stake by the world's most powerful churchman, and condemned to an outlaw's demise by the world's most powerful nobleman, that professor died of entirely natural causes.

When the messenger reached the city of Wittenberg, he burst into Melanchthon's morning lecture on the Book of Romans. When Melanchthon heard the news, he cried out, "The charioteer of Israel has fallen!"

The question on his mind was the one on the minds of so many. "What now?" What would become of Europe? What would become of Christendom? This professor of theology had swung a hammer whose blows echoed throughout the world and had shaken the Church to its foundations. But what now?

Two days later, Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor, ascended the pulpit of the Castle Church in front of princes and knights, academics and commoners. And before the assembled mourners, he preached Luther's funeral sermon. The text was from John's Revelation, the 14th chapter, "Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live upon the earth, to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come.'"

It's easy to see why Bugenhagen chose this text. In Luther, God had raised up for himself a messenger who spoke in a voice so loudly that it is heard half a millennium after his death. God raised up for himself a messenger in mid-air, above the fray, and out of the reach of the beast of the earth and sea. God raised up for himself a messenger of true repentance and true faith—from his first October thesis to his last gospel postil he was a messenger who proclaimed, "Fear God, and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come!" God raised up for himself a messenger that proclaimed the eternal gospel call to every tribe and nation and language and people.

But then, the funeral sermon ended, the final strains of music trailed off, and his metal coffin was lowered beneath the floor of the Castle Church. As the stones slipped into their places, they resounded with a finality that must have made everyone wonder, "What will happen now that death has muted God's messenger? What will happen to the teaching he stood by until death, now that the charioteer of Israel has fallen?"

Thanks be to God that the gospel of Christ uncovered again in the Middle Ages of this earth still shines brightly today in the confessional Lutheran Church. The Lord of the Church has preserved among us those doctrines on which Luther built the Church of the Reformation. Those gospel teachings are the foundation of faith and the Church: justification *solagratia, sola fide, sola scriptura*, the priesthood of all believers, the Christocentric nature of Scripture, the primacy of the Word, etc. Tied to all of those doctrines, Dr. Luther's legacy to the Church includes another teaching that was an innovative and reformative departure from the medieval theology of the Roman Catholic Church: the doctrine of Vocation.³²

The word "vocation" comes from the Latin *vocatio*, which means "calling," and is the word used by the Latin Bible for the call of God to faith and sonship. However, "vocation" in modern English usage is often associated with words about a man's work, profession, or trade. Vocational schools provide trade training. One's avocation fills the time when not at work. But Christian vocation encompasses more than a career. Even if we add all the other duties of daily life to work, we yet miss the meaning of "our calling." Christian vocation goes much further than the sum of work we have to do: our theme is not *Christ's Love, Our Job, or Christ's Love, our Duty*. Calling, *vocatio*, implies more. Like all of God's calls, Christian vocation, too, is a call with a purpose. Christian vocation is our calling to be the Masks of God.

Freed from medieval monasticism

What value does God place on the actions I perform in life? Are some activities more godly than others?

³¹ 1 John 3:1

³² In Latin, *vocatio*. In German, *Beruf*.

Is God more pleased when I am at a Church Council meeting or at my workplace? What meaning can I find in a dead-end job? Why is marriage so hard? These are the questions of Christian vocation.

Early in the history of the Church, the error of work righteousness had begun to creep into the thinking and teaching of many Christians. This false doctrine taught that good works play a part in salvation. The falsehood led to any number of abuses, including the Roman Catholic teaching of vocation. The thought process: if our good works play a part in salvation, then those people who devote their lives to good works, must be closer to God. Those people who do works that go beyond works expected of every Christian must be even better. Already at the time of Eusebius (c. 300) people divided the world into two kinds of life: one that focused on God, and one that focused on the world, with a second graded piety attached to the latter.

By the Middle Ages, the break between secular and sacred lives was complete. If a man wanted to live a sacred life, he must leave the world and enter the priesthood or monastery. Then one had a calling, a vocation from God. At the time of the Reformation, only monks, nuns, and priests had a vocation. The church taught that their lives were more godly than the life lived outside the church walls. They separated themselves to gain merit and live lives to attain perfection for themselves and for others. The church taught that God was especially pleased by the lives of these monks, nuns, and priests.³³

Into this world of monks and nuns trying to achieve perfection for themselves and others, entered Martin Luther. His recovery of the doctrine of justification was a game changer for all of theology. In the area of vocation, Luther's teaching on how man becomes righteous before God necessitated a rethinking of the concept.

Luther taught the Scriptural truth that there are two kinds of righteousness: a passive righteousness and an active righteousness. Before God, the only righteousness that avails is passive righteousness, the alien righteousness won for us by Christ and given to us by grace through faith. We are righteous because God imputed Christ's righteousness to us. No amount of good works (active righteousness) can make us righteous before God.³⁴ We are not righteous because of what we do, but because of what Christ did. We are purely passive in the realm of our salvation.

The conclusion Luther drew: no amount of monkish activity makes a man perfect or righteous in God's eyes and it certainly cannot benefit others. Only the righteousness of Christ makes us righteous. Therefore, anyone who trusts in God's promise has what God offers: forgiveness and righteousness in Jesus. People who lock themselves away in a monastery are not more pleasing to God than the cobbler making his shoes. In fact, trying to be justified by works moves a man in the opposite direction: nor to perfection, but to alienation from Christ.³⁵

Rather, saved by grace alone, man's vocation is a calling to a life of sanctification within his divinely assigned sphere of life. St. Paul told the Corinthians to stay in the calling in which they were called.³⁶ Luther said there is no need to leave our station and role in life to find a vocation that is godly. Vocation was not solely the possession of monks and nuns. No, every Christian had a calling that was equal in God's eyes. God is just as pleased with the life's work of an engineer as a church worker. Offices may differ, but all are priests, all are called—all have a calling, a vocation.

This radical rethinking of vocation had wide ramifications on the Christian life. Carter Lindberg suggested that Luther brought a Copernican revolution by the way he lifted secular life out of the inferiority assigned to it by the medieval church.³⁷ The changes effected by this new doctrine of vocation reshaped the social landscape of Europe. In 1517, monks, nuns, and priests comprised 6-10% of the entire population of Germany. Socially, they were a world to themselves: they were unmarried, lived apart from the community, and had their own courts and schools. In the span of one generation, however, Luther's return of vocation to the laity radically altered the social fabric of the country. The number of priests, monks, and nuns had dropped by two thirds, most monasteries and convents were closed, and the vast majority of clergy had married and was again part of the world.³⁸

³³ Even the parish priest was seen as lower than the Christian who separated himself completely from the outside world.

³⁴ *Coram Deo*.

³⁵ Galatians 5:4

³⁶ 1 Cor 7:20, ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἣ ἐκλήθη, ἐν ταύτῃ μείνετω.

³⁷ Quoted by Kolb and Arrand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 107.

³⁸ W.C. Placher. (Ed.). *Callings: Twenty Centuries of Christian Wisdom on Vocation*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 206.

Why had such vast changes occurred so quickly? Luther's revolution in thought had knocked monkish pursuits from the top of the ladder and glorified the active righteousness given by any Christian in the role and position where God had placed them. In fact, in the Small Catechism when Luther talked about the Table of Duties—our calling and vocation before God—he listed the various roles, or states that God has given us: husband, father, parent, rulers, pastors, children, servants. These roles Luther called "Holy Orders," the very words people used in the Middle Ages for the monastic life. The new Holy Orders of Christian life were pastors and princes, husbands and wives, employees and employers, children and widows. In these Holy Orders God called man and woman to live lives of active righteousness out of love for their neighbor. Here in the Table of Duties, not in the monastery, one could find the righteousness that God wants us to display in the world. Here, one found our calling in the world.

Empowered by the Promise

One might think that Luther's doctrine of passive righteousness and a receptive life in regard to God would drive the Christian away from the works and duties of life in this world. Why should I bother being a good employee? My salvation depends only on Christ, not on whether I give an honest day's work for my paycheck. Freedom from the burden of gaining his own righteousness, however, has exactly the opposite effect on the Christian. Rather than pushing him away from good works, it drives the Christian more deeply into them. Passive righteousness before God leads us to active righteousness, the good works we do in the sight of the world."³⁹

The passive righteousness given us by Christ serves as the source and motivation to do good works as a son of God, rather than a son of wrath. Corporations have long known that the secret to better work from their employees lies in getting the worker to labor because he wants to, rather than because he has to. Threaten termination, and most employees will do the work-grudgingly. However, if a company can create worker "buy-in" to the corporate mission, efficiency and quality of the work increases. Such is the difference between work one has to do, and work one wants to do.

The passive righteousness of Christ makes us saints in the eyes of God and bound for heaven. Christians who have this heavenly calling⁴⁰ are now freed to serve God in their earthly calling, not out of fear or guilt, but out of love and thanks. Our life of active righteousness is compelled by the love of Christ and the faith that he has given us. This love and faith change our attitude toward the roles and responsibilities God has given us. Now, in the light of forgiveness and imputed righteousness, we are freed from works and at the same time driven more deeply into them, but with a better impetus.

Living our Christian vocation means to carry out the works and will of God in the stations and roles in life where he placed us. The gospel promise of passive righteousness changes our attitude toward the responsibilities we have in our active righteousness. The gospel transforms our response from the slave's, "I must!" to a son's, "I will!"

Passive righteousness defines our relationship with God. Active righteousness defines our relationships with others. For example, the Christian rightly says, "To become a child of my heavenly Father, I can do nothing; I am worth nothing; Christ must be all and do all for me." That is passive righteousness that defines our relationship with God. However, the Christian cannot say the same thing when talking about his life in the world, "To be a father to my children, I can do nothing; I am worth nothing; Christ must be all and do all for me." No, before the world, God commands an active righteousness: good works that please him and do God's work among our neighbors. The Christian then fulfills these works in his vocation-not to get to heaven, but because that is where he is going.

Vocation finds its strength, motivation, and source in the passive righteousness before God. Vocation finds its definition and sphere of activity in our active righteousness before the world.

Life dignified with a purpose

"Why am I here?" "What's the point of my life?" Such existential questions plague the mind of modern man, precisely because of a lack of calling. Without faith in Christ, there is no vocation; there is no meaning

³⁹ *Coram mundo*.

⁴⁰ Hebrews 3:1

behind life in this world that extends beyond Self. "Only when men believe in God can they perceive substantial meaning in existence; only when men can perceive meaning can they be captivated by vocation; and when men are captivated by vocation, they can live above despair to the glory of God."⁴¹

What then is our calling? It is so much more than our occupation. No, there is a sense of high dignity in the word "calling." The dignity flows from the purpose our calling gives us. Yes, our calling is to live as God's sons in the world where he placed us. But when God calls, it always is a purposeful call. God's purpose in our vocation is simple: he wants to wear us as a mask.

In 1518, Luther defended his theology in front of his Augustinian Order at the Heidelberg Disputation. In his twentieth thesis, he explains that God reveals himself to us by hiding himself. Isaiah proclaimed this, "Truly you are a God who hides himself,"⁴² and Jesus explained it to Philip.⁴³ When God shows himself to us, he shows us his back⁴⁴ because he is the *deus absconditus*, the hidden God.

How can we comprehend the glory of the immortal God, glory that makes the mountains shake and the elements melt? God wants us to know him, but he can't just show himself to us in all his glory. It would literally kill us. To Moses, God showed his back. To Elijah, he came as a gentle whisper. The mind boggling reality is that when God wants to reveal himself to us, he does it by hiding himself. When he wants us to know what he's like, he comes to us with his glory and power hidden.

Luther says that God wears masks⁴⁵ when he interacts with man. On Halloween, a child wears a mask to turn his cherubic face into the haunting face of a ghoul, that he might scare someone. But consider our God! His is a face at which all the cherubim cover their eyes; from his face shines glory so great, and beauty so indescribable, that no one in earth or heaven can fully bear that sight. He wears a mask that we might not be scared, but succored; that we might not be killed but cared for.

What is the mask that God wears to interact with the world? You. He wears you and your works and your ways. He puts you on and wears that mask as he protects and preserves this world. Here is life with high dignity. Not only that you should be called sons of God, but that God would use you and even the smallest things you do to care for his world. The masks of God are "the hands, channels, and means through which God bestows all blessings. For examples, he gives to the mother breasts and milk for her infant or gives grain and all sorts of fruit from the earth for sustenance—things no creature could produce for itself."⁴⁶

God feeds your children; but he wears a mask when he does it, the mask of Christian father. God protects the helpless, but he wears a mask when he does it—the mask of Christian police officer. God comforts and heals the sick, but he wears a mask when he does it—Christian nurses and doctors. Here is the high dignity in whatever sphere or role God has assigned the Christian.

The Christian autoworker heads to the plant each day knowing that even the repetitive nature of his job cannot take away the dignity of being God's mask to provide for his family. The Christian homemaker covered in baby food knows that lack of recognition for her work cannot take away the dignity of God wearing her as a mask today to care for these young ones. From janitor to general manager, from engineer to day laborer, God has given every Christian a calling to serve the needs of neighbor and family, with the high dignity of fulfilling God's purpose as his mask.

Suddenly the works of active righteousness that avail us nothing for salvation are of infinite worth here on earth. Here on earth, our acts of righteousness become the acts of God wearing the mask—the mask of us. "The hand, the body, and their vocation belong to the earth. There is no redemption in that, but that is not the idea. The purpose is that one's neighbor is served. The hands serve in the vocation which is God's downward-reaching work, for the well being of men."⁴⁷

The gospel calls us to be the sons of God. That is the call. But the gospel also invites us to be the sons of God wherever we are and wherever God places us. That is our calling.

Our calling to be masks of God is primarily a gift, and secondarily a duty. It is a call that contains both

⁴¹ Donald Heiges. *The Christian's Calling*. (Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, 1958), 19.

⁴² Isaiah 45:15

⁴³ John 14:9-10. Jesus was a mask of God.

⁴⁴ *Posteriora dei*

⁴⁵ *Larvae dei*

⁴⁶ LC, First Commandment.

⁴⁷ Gustaf Wingren. *Luther on Vocation*. Rasmussen, Carl C., trans. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 11.

law and gospel. God has called us to be his mask; that is a gift of grace and love. However, our role as masks of God come with duties that God wants us to fulfill.

The pastor who preaches and teaches the Word of God, but fails in his duty as a father has failed to be the mask of God for his children. The CEO who triples the company's stock price but replaces the wife of his youth with a new model has failed to be the mask of God in his marriage. The congregational outreach team member who canvasses three nights a week, but is lazy at work has failed to be the mask of God in his community.

There is only one place where those failed masks of God can find forgiveness for their shortfalls: the atoning blood of Christ. And it is that same forgiving Christ that then sends these sinners-made-sons back into the world to live as masks of God again. In Christ, God says, "You are my sons. Everything in this world is yours. So use it all as my sons. Use it all for my glory in service of your neighbor. That is your calling—you are my masks."

We fulfill our Christian vocation by being God's instrument of preservation and aid to those around us. Here is the meaningful and true service that only a son can bring. It is our calling that changes our obedience from a slave's, "I must!" to a son's "I will." The restoration of a right relationship with our Father leads us to have a right relationship with the world. Our calling as masks of God reaches into all the stations and estates in which we find ourselves. Christian vocation is essentially using the rights and blessings of being sons of God in the way God wants his sons to use them. That means that everything in this world is again at our disposal to give glory to God. Sons of God serve the world, and God hides behind us as we do it.

Life has no purpose without God. But with God, all of life has a purpose, from the most noble estates to the most insignificant duties. They all have the high dignity of being part of our calling as God's mask.⁴⁸

Our calling to be the Church of God

God called us from eternity to be his children. God calls us in time to live as his sons in the roles and stations where he placed us in the world. But we have another calling, too. This calling again is one of pure grace; and again, it is a calling to fulfill the purpose God has for us. He calls us to be his Church—that is our calling for the world.

One of the incomprehensible aspects of God's salvation plan is that from the very beginning he planned to let his people participate in it. Not in any way of being co-redeemers with Christ; not in any way lending our own faith or efforts to his grace. No, we are purely passive when it comes to the work of our salvation, but yet, God intimately ties humanity to it.

From the very beginning, God showed the intimate involvement of humanity in the plan of salvation. Speaking of our mother, Eve, he said to the serpent, "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."⁴⁹ The Savior would win salvation, but humanity would be involved. In fact, humanity would be the way God would bring his calling to the world.

A people with a purpose

From the time when man moved east of Eden and the love and grace of God were forgotten by the sinful world, the people of God began to call out, to proclaim the name of the LORD.⁵⁰ The sons of God were carriers of the promise that the world desperately needed to hear. God in his grace involved humanity in bringing his call to the world. He did so by calling to himself a people with a purpose.

In the Old Testament the people God called for a special purpose was the nation of Israel. In Genesis 12, the LORD appears to Abram, a childless old man married to a barren wife, and promises to make of him a great

⁴⁸ "For more on the subject of Christian vocation, see the excellent papers from the 2006 Symposium on Christian Vocation at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. A more extensive treatment of the Lutheran doctrine of vocation can be found in the papers "Understanding Our Calling," "Uncovering Our Calling," and "Unleashing Our Calling." <http://hvwww.wls.wels.net/sections/continuing-education/symposium/59.php>

⁴⁹ Genesis 3:15

⁵⁰ :הוהּ יְהוָה לְקַרְא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה –Genesis 4:26

nation, a people begotten by the promise of God, a people with the purpose of sharing the promise of God with the world: "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."⁵¹

God had a purpose to achieve, and he called a people into existence to carry out that purpose. The purpose to which God called Israel was the promise made to the patriarchs that all people on earth might be blessed by the arrival of God in the flesh. Their calling was to be the people through whom the Seed of Woman would come. They would carry this promise and the line of the Promise-Fulfiller through generation after generation.

Why did God call these people? Why would he involve them in his plan of salvation? His reasons defy our logic. The only answer is grace. As Moses said to them:

For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession. The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers.⁵²

They carried the promise and told the story of the Savior even when they were unaware of it. The straying kings of Judah still carried David's line forward; the people of the Exodus were telling the story of the Savior to come.⁵³ And then one day about 2000 years after Abram heard the promise, and 2000 years before we had, this people achieved their purpose in the womb of a virgin overshadowed by the power of the Most High and bearing the Hope of all the ages and the true Son of Israel, God with us.

In the New Testament, the need for a physical bloodline to carry the promise of the Savior had passed. Christ had come and made atonement. But now God wanted his good news, the promise of forgiveness, shared with the world. Again defying all human logic, the Lord of heaven and earth took the priceless treasure and put it into jars of clay. He invited humanity to be involved with his plan of salvation.

Just as God called Israel into existence to fulfill his purpose, so now has God called a new people out of nothing to carry out his purposes in the world. This people, too, would carry Christ to the world. God called a people with a purpose—he called the Church:

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. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.⁵⁴

The Church is a chosen people, a body of priests and kings, a nation holy and belonging to God. That is what God made us by calling us to faith and sonship in Christ. Immediately following these amazing statements of what we are, Peter tells us why God made us all those things. He tells us the calling that God gives the Church, her purpose—namely, that the Church might declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into light.

The Church's call is to declare.⁵⁵ The word Peter uses means to publish abroad what is not known. In Greek theater, this word was used to describe what a messenger did who described to the audience happenings that the spectators could not see. The Church's call is to declare, to publish abroad, what people outside of the Church do not know: God's praises.⁵⁶ The word for "praises" means the excellence of his achievements, everything he accomplished, all that God has done for which he deserves our praise. His intent was that now,

⁵¹ Genesis 12:2ff.

⁵² Dt 7:6-8

⁵³ In Matthew 2:15, the Gospel writer takes the words of Hosea and applies the history of Israel as a prophesy of Christ that was fulfilled after Herod's death.

⁵⁴ 1 Pe 2:9-10

⁵⁵ ἐξαγγείλητε

⁵⁶ τὰς ἀρετὰς

through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the world.⁵⁷

Thus the Church is called to publish abroad the excellent works of God which are unknown to those outside of her. Quite simply, our calling as the Church is to preach the gospel of forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.

Means and Ministry as the Mouth of God

Our calling as the Church is to be the mouth of God to this world. Grace upon grace, God took a mission the angels wish they had and gave it to us. Christ has invited us to participate in his rescue mission for the world. God made a promise to Jeremiah. "Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your mouth.'"⁵⁸ When Jeremiah later doubted the reliability of God and his promises, God made the promise to his messenger even greater. In the fifteenth chapter, God tells Jeremiah literally, "You will be my mouth."⁵⁹

As the Church, our calling is to be the Mouth of God speaking his Word to the world. Jesus outlined the purpose and mission of the Church at the end of Luke's gospel, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'"⁶⁰

After accomplishing all Scripture had foretold of his work, Christ then told the Church what her calling would be—to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations. That is the purpose God has given us. He calls us to preach the law and the gospel, repentance and forgiveness to a world that needs to hear it.

We are called to be the Mouth of God, making his invitation to sinners. God promised, "so is my Word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."⁶¹ His purpose is the glory of God and the salvation of man. And grace upon grace, he uses us, his Church, to do it.

No longer does God's voice thunder from the mountain or from the skies. Rather, God puts his words into the mouth of his Church and his ministers, and God speaks through us. This is what St. Paul meant when he said:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.⁶²

Christ outlined the Church's calling to preach the gospel in the closing chapters of the four Gospels. As Jesus commissioned his Church to declare his praises to the world, he said:

Go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Preach the good news!

Preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name.

Forgive the sins of the penitent and bind the sins of the impenitent.

⁵⁷ Eph 3:10

⁵⁸ Jeremiah 1:9

⁵⁹ כָּפִי תְהִיֶּה Jeremiah 15:19

⁶⁰ Luke 24:45-47

⁶¹ Is 55:11

⁶² 2 Co 5:18-20

Through the Church and the office of the Holy Ministry, God deigned to let humanity participate in his plan of salvation. The Augsburg Confession says, "So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted."⁶³ Called by the gospel into this faith, the Church is called to declare his praises and announce his forgiveness to others. The Church is nothing other than "the congregation of saints and true believers"⁶⁴ "in which the gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are correctly administered."⁶⁵ The calling of the Church is to preach the gospel purely and rightly-both the spoken Word and the visible Word.⁶⁶

Twin directives of our calling

As called ministers and called members of the Church, God has given us twin directives to guide our mission of preaching the gospel: share the Word with the world, and keep the Word for the world. Paul outlined the twin directives of the Church's calling when he wrote to Timothy. Note his encouragement to both preach the Word and keep it in the face of error and also to preach the Word as an evangelist:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.⁶⁷

Our calling as the Church is to preach the gospel. However, the call to preach the gospel is like a two sided coin. One aspect of preaching the gospel is sharing the Word and promises of God with both the lost and the found. But on the other side of the coin, preaching the Gospel also means to keep the Word for the world. As the Bible encourages us: "If you hold to my teachings... watch your life and doctrine closely... be always ready to give an answer... rightly divide the Word of truth." Christ did not intend for us to have only one side of the coin or the other. They are two different aspects of the same call. Christ wants us to both share the Word and keep the Word that both we and our hearers be saved.⁶⁸

Our calling as the WELS

At this 60th Convention of the WELS, we gather under the theme: *Christ's Love, Our Calling*. So then, what is our calling as the WELS? What is it that we are to be about as a synod? What is our purpose? What would God have us be about in this day and age? The call of our synod is no different than the call of the Church. We are to preach the gospel, by sharing the Word with the world and keeping the Word for the world. But then how does our calling affect the priorities we have in our work together? It is no coincidence that the constitution of this group mirrors the purpose and directives of the Church. Our calling as the WELS echoes that Biblical model:

The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church...⁶⁹

Extend and conserve the true doctrine; share the Word and keep the Word. We cannot do one at the expense of the other. We cannot have one and leave the other undone. They are twin directives that we are to be

⁶³ AC V, 1. *Concordia*.

⁶⁴ AC VIII, 1. *Concordia*.

⁶⁵ AC VII, 2. *Concordia*.

⁶⁶ Abraham Calov properly did not see a distinction in roles between *verbum et sacramenta*. He called the sacraments the *verbum visibile*, the visible Word. Cf. Appold, 131.

⁶⁷ 1 Ti 4:2-5

⁶⁸ 1 Ti 4:16

⁶⁹ Constitution and Bylaws of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Article IV, Object.

about. We keep the Word that we might share it; we share the Word that others might join us in preserving it. They feed each other.

This is our purpose, our calling—to share the Word and keep the Word. Just consider for a moment the prominent role that dual calling played in the early history of our church body, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Sharing the Word: A Synod goes

The man responsible for our synod's founding was born 209 years ago in Notzingen, Wuerttemberg. John Muehlhaeuser worked as a baker until his entrance into the Barmen mission school for foreign missionaries. This man had serious outreach credibility and a driving desire to save souls. As a young man he had preached his way across Europe, sharing the gospel in the face of persecution.

His mission work led to lost employment, a transient lifestyle, and even imprisonment. Muehlhaeuser was arrested in Bohemia for evangelizing and spent eight months behind bars. But he was a missionary even in chains. By means of his testimony the Holy Spirit brought two fellow prisoners to faith, along with the police commissioner and even one of the two policemen who escorted him to the border when he was deported.⁷⁰

This man took seriously the calling of the Church to share the Word. At age 32 he enrolled in the German mission society to train for outreach work in foreign fields. However, they sent him not to Africa or Asia, but to the New World to gather the lost German immigrants who were shepherdless in America. After service in New York, the veteran missionary left the East Coast to come to the frontier of Wisconsin to build up the Church of God there.

In 1849, Muehlhaeuser and three other mission society pastors met to found the Wisconsin Synod. Our synod rose from the desire of these godly men that the Church fulfill its calling to go and make disciples of all nations. The early pastors of our synod were driven by the Church's calling to share the Word. They preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit brought in a harvest of souls. Within 16 years the little three-pastor synod had grown to 52 pastors with 125 congregations and 12,000 members.⁷¹

Sharing the Word continued to drive the work of the synod throughout its next 150 years. Home mission work occupied the majority of new field openings as the church body expanded across the frontier and eventually across all 50 states by 1983. Foreign missions also took a prominent place in synod priorities from the start. The founders were world missionaries, so the drive to reach foreign fields was strong. Early synod efforts prioritized foreign mission work with offerings taken for the heathen mission work and concerted efforts among the American Indians. In later years the synod's work among the Apache Indians and our entry into Japan and Africa became the chief thrusts of our efforts to share the Word with the world, even as far away as the hook of Kafue River in Rhodesia and the Shinto shrines of Tokyo.

The drive for mission work is part and parcel of our calling as the Church of God. Christ invited us to be part of his mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness to all the world; Christ commanded his Church to go to all nations with the message of heaven won and waiting. This is our calling.

Luther summarized our calling as the Church in a sermon in Wittenberg, 1523, on I Peter 2:9. He said:

God permits us to live here on earth in order that we may bring others to faith, just as he has brought us. You must, says Peter, exercise the chief function of a priest, to proclaim the wonderful deed God has performed for you to bring you out of darkness into the light. Let it be your chief work to proclaim this publicly and to call everyone into the light as you have been called.⁷²

Our calling as the Church of God is to share the Word with the world. This has been and should be our priority as Christians and as the synod: sharing law and gospel with the lost and with the found for repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

One cannot conclude from this, however, that mission work is our only priority or purpose as Christians,

⁷⁰ J.P. Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod* (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Company, 1981), 22. ⁷¹ Fredrich, 13-14.

⁷¹ Fredrich: 13-14.

⁷² LW 30:11

congregations, or a synod. A motto of "outreach over everything" misses the dual directives in our calling. The call of the Church isn't to share any Word or part of the Word, but to share the truth of God's Word with the world. God told Jeremiah, "if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, then you will be my mouth."⁷³

The founders had created a New Lutheran synod:⁷⁴ one that certainly called itself Lutheran, but would have no problem serving congregations that did not confess the faith of the Augsburg Confession.⁷⁵ Muehlhaeuser certainly considered himself Lutheran, but he did not consider the Confessions of the Lutheran church⁷⁶ binding on himself or the church body he founded.⁷⁷ He wrote, "Just because I am not strictly [Lutheran] or OldLutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the ecclesiastical fence."⁷⁸

The German mission societies and our synod founders are to be commended for their love for the lost and their self-sacrifice and drive to share the Word of God in a country not their own. A debt of love is owed to them by all the heirs of the synod they founded. Their fault was not that they prioritized sharing the Word, but that they prioritized missions at the expense of doctrine. They thought sharing the Word with the world was more important than keeping the Word for the world.

The calling of the Church is not to pit sharing against keeping or keeping against sharing. God calls us to do both: share it and keep it; God wants outreach and inreach, training and sending, mission zeal and doctrinal commitment. One side of the coin does not suffice if we hope to be true to our calling.

Keeping the Word: A synod grows

John Bading would become the second president of the Wisconsin Synod, and would be known as the man who led our church body on its journey to confessional Lutheranism⁷⁹ and a balance between sharing the Word and keeping the Word. Though known for his efforts to correct faulty doctrine, Bading should not be pigeonholed as a man more concerned with dogmatics than winning souls. This man studied and applied for service to be a missionary to Africa; he was commissioned and sent as a world missionary to America; he served the faithful and sought the lost across the frontier. But he also believed that going and making disciples by baptizing them needed to be coupled with teaching them to obey everything Christ has commanded us. Sharing the Word needed to be paired with keeping the truth of God's Word.

When young Bading arrived to begin ministry in 1853, his commitment to both keep the Word and share the Word caused an immediate clash between him and President Muehlhaeuser over the Lutheran Confessions. Muehlhaeuser considered the Confessions as nothing but "paper fences" and saw no need to involve them in Bading's ordination.⁸⁰ Ordinand Bading strongly disagreed, and demanded that he be pledged to the Book of Concord. Muehlhaeuser backed down, but Bading felt disillusioned with the synod. In fact, he approached the Missouri Synod for membership in that confessional group, but the district president, Pastor Fuerbringer,

⁷³ Jeremiah 15:19 -- כִּפִּי תִהְיֶה

⁷⁴ "Old Lutheran" was the name given to Lutherans who refused to compromise doctrine during the Prussian Union. Many Old Lutherans left their home and people to come to America in order to practice their faith according to their confessional commitments. "New Lutheran" was the name given to Lutherans who were less concerned with doctrine than with outreach.

⁷⁵ See Muehlhaeuser's letter to Gotthilf Weitbrecht who left for Methodism, quoted in Koehler's *History*, pages 43-44. The letter well describes Muehlhaeuser's New Lutheran views of the Confessions in his own words. Interestingly, Koehler comments that Weitbrecht's departure came because "he was a sentimental tommy and easily moved to tears, hence Methodism appealed to him."

⁷⁶ The Lutheran Confessions are statements of faith contained in the Book of Concord of 1580: the Ecumenical Creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Small and Large Catechisms, the Smalcald Articles, the Formula of Concord.

⁷⁷ It is surmised that Muehlhaeuser crossed out the references to the Lutheran Confessions in the original Wisconsin Synod constitution and replaced them with the words "pure Bible Christianity" and "pure Bible Word." See E.C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 12-13.

⁷⁸ Koehler, 42.

⁷⁹ Confessional Lutherans believe in the ongoing relevance of the Book of Concord of 1580 and the confessions of faith contained therein. They believe that the confessions are normative for the Church today because they are statements of the changeless truths of Scripture.

⁸⁰ Confessional Lutheran pastors make a promise at their ordination that they believe the confessions in the Book of Concord are in agreement with the one scriptural faith, and that all their teaching and administration of the sacraments will conform to both Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

encouraged him to stay and raise the standard of doctrine and practice.⁸¹

Thankfully, Bading did precisely that. Along with men like Philipp Koehler and Gottlieb Reim, Bading and his Northwestern Conference fostered a growing confessional stance in the Wisconsin Synod. They sought to have the mission attitude of the group matched with a commitment to teach everything Jesus commanded specifically, as the Lutheran Church confessed in the Book of Concord.

Under the influence of men like Bading, the Wisconsin Synod slowly left behind its unionistic past and began to recast itself. The synod held on to its missionary heart but sought to imbue its association with a commitment to the confessions. This two-fold emphasis quite rightly matched the calling of Christ for his Church: to go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them to obey everything he commanded us. Share the Word; keep the Word.

What did this turn to Confessional Lutheranism mean for the synod? Most significantly it meant ceasing unionistic practices with the Reformed. The German mission societies worked in the spirit of the Prussian Union which sought to eliminate the differences between Protestant denominations. The elimination of those differences invariably meant a compromise in Lutheran doctrine.

Today the difference between Confessional Lutheran church bodies and non-confessional church bodies are writ large. Look around today and you will see Lutherans who deny the inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, and the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone. Of course, these are not Confessional Lutherans. They do not hold to the teaching of the Lutheran Church which recognizes that the Book of Concord is the *norma normata* which correctly expounds Scripture, the *norma normans*.⁸² Having seen the downward spiral towards spiritual irrelevance in today's non-confessional Lutheran church bodies, the modern spectator could see the distinctions between Old and New Lutherans in our synod's history as almost quaint. Almost...

The reason we are a Confessional Lutheran church body is because our calling as the Church of God is to go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them to obey everything he commanded us. Mission zeal for "going" does not give license to fail to "teach."

Fulfilling the twin purposes of our calling brought the fledgling synod to a challenging crossroads. This was a ministerium full of missionaries, trained and sent to the world field, filled with a heart for outreach and a love for the lost. They had given up their lives in the Old Country to come and be on the frontlines of gospel outreach in the frontier of America. No one questioned their passion for evangelism. However, as our church body became more confessional, this group of missionaries began yearning to fill a gaping void: they wanted schools—ministerial education schools.

For the first decade of its existence, the Wisconsin Synod received the great majority of its pastors from German missionary societies who trained and sent world missionaries to various fields. The societies favored the New Lutheran synod founded by Muehlhaeuser and provided workers for the burgeoning church body.

Note that *all the costs* of ministerial training in the Wisconsin Synod were paid by the mission societies. They also covered the costs of sending the men to their new field of labor. No synodical dollars were spent on ministerial education.

So then why did this ministerium full of missionaries long for ministerial education schools? The reasons match the makeup of this mission-minded and increasingly confessional group. First, they wanted to establish ministerial education schools so that there would be a steady supply of pastors to reach out to new fields and serve existing ones. The mission societies just couldn't send enough men to serve the needs of the church body. They wanted schools because they wanted more missionaries that they might fulfill our calling as the Church of God to go and make disciples.

But secondly, they sought to establish schools because they realized that as Confessional Lutherans, they needed more than just workers for the harvest field. They needed Confessional Lutheran workers. The workers trained by the mission societies often had serious doctrinal issues because of their non-confessional training. A new commitment to being a confessional Lutheran church led them to eventually abandon the German mission societies that provided workers *gratis*, for a system that would cost the synod a great deal of money, but would

⁸¹ Koehler, 45.

⁸² To see how far from the Confessions some Lutherans have fallen, consider the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* made by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. The Lutherans sacrificed the very doctrine on which the Church stands, and which the Confessions properly taught. Rightly, Kurt Marquart called the document the "Augsburg Concession."

provide the right kind of workers for the mission field.

The synod tried outsourcing ministerial education in various ways, but each avenue was stymied by the implications of training workers in an environment that compromised doctrine. Leaders explored Illinois State University, but abandoned the idea because of doctrinal differences with two Illinois synods that supported the school. One synod pastor trained at Gettysburg Seminary in Pennsylvania in 1861, but the Pennsylvania Ministerium's determination to serve both Lutheran and Reformed congregations discouraged sending more men there. Wartburg Seminary in Iowa was investigated as a possibility in 1861, but was abandoned because of the Iowa Synod's false teaching on millennialism.

New approaches to worker training were tried. This group wasn't tied to tradition—they were willing to think outside the box. However, apprentice-type training by parish pastors proved to be difficult and resorting to fly-by-night pastors in time of desperate need too often proved to be the cure that was worse than the original bite.⁸³ Indeed, not just the quantity of called workers was at issue, but the quality of the called workers. The lack of a ministerial education system had to be addressed. "The outside attacks...calling attention to the motley character of the Synod's clergy and their practice, gave emphasis to the project [of establishing a ministerial education program]."⁸⁴

The synod's growing commitment to the Lutheran Confessions engendered a commitment to ministerial education. Once we realized, the error of our mildly pietistic Lutheranism, and realized that confessional Lutheranism required a confessional stance and confessional pastors, the issue of schools became paramount. Ministerial education did not receive high priority during Muehlhaeuser's tenure as president because he saw no problem with the products of the mission societies—precisely because he had no real subscription to the Confessions. When the Wisconsin Synod began to grow in its faithfulness to the Word of God, the desire to train its workers did as well.

In 1860, President Muehlhaeuser declined to be reelected as president. The turn to the right and to schools began. The synod elected John Bading who strongly urged a more vigorous commitment to the Word of God as expressed in the Confessions. The growing commitment to keeping the Word can be noted in Gottlieb Reim's synod essay of 1861.⁸⁵ By 1862, the synod officially repudiated the unionistic practices of the past, and made plans to open its own training school. In 1863, the new seminary opened in Watertown, WI.

A church body forsook a training system that cost it nothing, and pursued one that would cost a great deal. That it undertook this new endeavor during the midst of the Civil War only underscores the importance ascribed to the project. Confessional commitment means a commitment to training confessional Lutheran workers. Why? Because our calling is to both share the Word and keep the Word. Our workers need to be workmen approved who rightly handle the Word of truth. The experience of going and growing taught our fathers that a ministerial education system was the best way to train those workers to fulfill both directives of the Church's calling.

A confessional Lutheran Church with two passions

Our calling as the Church and as the WELS is to preach the gospel,⁸⁶ by sharing the Word and keeping the Word. Christ did not leave us the option of choosing "going" over "teaching" or "keeping" over "sharing." They are two sides of the same coin: Preach the gospel! One drives the other. We go so that the Holy Spirit might call more of his elect to faith. Once found, we teach the new believer the truth of God's Word and all the promises and plans that God has made for him. Teaching new believers about the unbelievable grace of God cannot but engender a desire to go and make disciples. Going leads to teaching, and teaching leads to going. It's a symbiotic relationship that Christ never intended to have his Church divide by pitting one directive against the other.

Imagine if the Church failed to fulfill one of its twin directives. The church that teaches God's Word faithfully to its own, but does not share it with the world, fails to participate in the mission to which Christ invited it. The church that goes to the entire world, but does not teach everything the has commanded us, fails

⁸³ Fredrich, 15.

⁸⁴ Koehler, 119.

⁸⁵ Gottlieb Reim, "Bekennnißstand der ev. luth. Synode von Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Synod Proceedings*, 1861, 14-19.

⁸⁶ In the broad sense. Luke 24:47 certainly tells us that it is to be both law and gospel.

Jesus' litmus test for discipleship: If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.⁸⁷ Mission zeal without sound doctrine is mission work that is slowly losing hold of the one tool that opens hearts. No methods, no programs, no people skills can convert sinful man—only the Word of God. Mission work without zeal for doctrine is destined to falter. Conversely, zeal for doctrine without a corresponding zeal for sharing the Word is like walking with one shoe: you are always off balance. We keep the Word so that we can share it with the world. Mission work both at home and abroad is what makes our zeal for doctrine so important. Watch your life and doctrine closely, Paul said ... but why? Not doctrine for doctrine's sake, but for the sake of salvation.⁸⁸

As we gather here, we are faced with financial decisions that will certainly change the face of our synod. It's an appropriate time for us to look at this church body, our synod, and consider Our Calling and what it means for our future. Our calling is to be a church with two passions: keeping the Word for the world and sharing the Word with the world.

Can we recapture our founders' missionary passion to share this Word with the world, the lost and found? Can we retain our fathers' passion to keep the word for the world? Of course—but how? Through the gentle whisper of gospel, the remembrance of dripping water, and the taste of body and blood. We can do all things through Christ who gives us strength.

When God speaks, he opens his mouth wide. Our calling is to be his child, to be his mask, to be his Church. The God who called us before the world began is now calling us again in the last age of this earth, and his words meant for the Church in crying times ring true in our age as well. They are words of comfort and courage, words of power and promise: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."⁸⁹

God has called us to sonship before him, to service in the world, and to proclaim salvation to the world. Nothing can describe the magnitude of his mercy and grace. All we can do is marvel, and then in grateful thanks seek his strength to live lives worthy of the calling we have received.

"How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!
And that is what we are!"⁹⁰

⁸⁷ John 8:31

⁸⁸ 1 Timothy 4:16

⁸⁹ Revelation 1:17-18

⁹⁰ 1 Jn 3:1

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