

One Lord, One Church, One Ministry

[Presented to the Western Wisconsin District Convention, Martin Luther Preparatory School,
Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, June 7, 1988]

By Professor Wayne Mueller

We've got a problem. Our American society has lost its Judeo-Christian ethic. The old as well as the young live together as man and wife without marriage. Chemical abuse of all kinds has become a pervasive threat to the efficiency of private industry and to the safety of public transportation. While massive campaigns are mounted to save the seals, the snaildarter and the wild horses, newborn human infants with birth defects are purposely allowed to die, and state legislatures rush to pass laws regulating the sale of their tissues and organs.

We have a problem. Churches that still bear the name Christian seem to have forgotten the derivation of their name. Lutheran Christians have gotten used to hearing the word divorce in their congregations. Women are drafted for leadership positions in evangelical circles. Homosexuals are offered for ordination into the public ministry in the largest Lutheran synod. Church membership and attendance is down in almost all mainline Christian denominations. Two masters of Christian media ministry have publicly disgraced themselves by their sexual indiscretions. A record number of Catholic priests are being formally charged with pederasty. One church body after another seems bent on seeking relevancy in our modern world by denying the inspiration of Holy Scripture. Foreign mission work and domestic evangelism efforts are being forsaken in lieu of political merger, social gospel and liberation theology.

We do have a problem. In our own fellowship we struggle on local and synodical levels to maintain ministry at status quo. The problems of broken families frustrate the work of our Christian schools and place a heavy burden on the parish pastor's time. We lose members to immorality and indifference faster than we can baptize and confirm new ones. The lifestyle of many of the members of our churches is indistinguishable from the pattern of life among the unbelieving. We cannot recruit and train enough men and women to meet all the demands and challenges of ministry, and we wrestle to provide materially for the ones we have trained. We program evangelism so that we might have at least a semblance of what came naturally to the early Christians. We program stewardship to stimulate thankfulness and appreciation among the most richly materially blessed people in the world. We program recruitment for our Christian schools so that their self-evident advantages might at least receive consideration over against secular, humanistic education. And then we program spiritual renewal so that we will not weary of all our other spiritual programs.

We have a problem. Each of us, within himself. We fight it for a while and then we give up. We get lazy. Or we get tired. We may get bitter. We may like to think that we're okay and everybody else has a problem. We wonder every day whether it is worth the struggle, whether anybody cares, whether God himself cares about or is still involved on behalf of his people.

We have a problem. But it is not any one of the things mentioned above. God has given us sufficient knowledge through his law to keep us from mistaking any of these symptoms for the real disease that lies behind them. The disease is sin. The real problem is sin. Sin is causing the anguishing downward spiral of morality in our country. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Pr 14:34). Sin is at the root of the shame of American Christian churches. To them Jesus echoes his words to the church at Ephesus: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent!" (Rev 2:4,5). Sin lies at the heart of the lull in spirit and activity in our own congregations. Our Lord might well repeat what he said to the faithful at Sardis: "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent" (Rev 3:2,3). Sin is the cause of our own weariness in the fight for the crown of life. We must say with St. Paul, "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it" (Ro 7:20).

ONE LORD

Maybe all of this seems terribly obvious. But God must focus our eyes on the point of the problem before he leads us through faith to see the single solution. Jesus Christ is the only solution to the problem of sin. All other solutions grant temporary relief to the symptoms: money, politics, social awareness, education, science, art, medicine, military might, economic reform, revolution, religion, industrial development and civil justice. These have all been tried. They have all seemed for a while to ease the pain or divert our attention from the real problem. But the sin remains, and “the wages of sin is death” (Ro 6:23).

The Bible makes it clear that Jesus is the only Savior from sin and thus the only way for us with the problem of sin to come to God. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me!” (Jn 14:6), Jesus said of himself. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men” (1 Ti 2:5,6).

Let us never forget that our Christian faith is absolutely exclusive. It excludes all other saviors and solutions. But let us also remember that the work of Jesus is absolutely inclusive. “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (2 Jn 2:2). He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Co 5:19). Whenever we are pressed by the conundrum of sin in any form in society, in the church or in our personal lives, God reminds us there is only one answer. “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Ro 3:22,23). There is only one who has mastered sin, conquered death and defeated the devil. There is only “one Lord” (Ephesians 1:5).

ONE CHURCH

On my shelf is a little hardcover book that lists over 1600 different denominations in the United States. That’s not 1600 different churches, mind you, but 1600 different kinds of churches. But the Lord Jesus has only one church. When Jesus says, “On this rock I will build my church” (Mt 16:18), he means the rock solid confession that he is Christ the Lord. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Ro 10:9). So those who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin are members of Jesus’ church.

There are many different names for Jesus’ church in the Bible. Those who believe in Jesus are called his disciples, Christians, believers, sons of God, chosen people, royal priesthood, holy nation, a people belonging to God, fellow citizens with God’s people, members of God’s household, sheep, flock, the body of Christ and saints. The church is also called the City of God, the Temple of God, Mount Zion, the Bride of Christ, the Kingdom of God and the Lord’s Vineyard. Yet regardless of what Jesus’ people are called as individuals or as a group, they are only one church. St. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “There is one body,” and “the church... is his body” (4:4; 1:22,23).

When the Lord talks about his church in Scriptures, he is not talking about a building or an organization. Sometimes the word church is used in the singular and is mentioned as being in one locality, such as in Paul’s letters and in Jesus’ addresses to the churches in Asia Minor in the Book of Revelation. Sometimes the word church is used in the plural, and it is clear that more than one group of believers in more than one place is meant. But even in those passages where a church or churches are mentioned in reference to a certain locality, it always seems that the relationship of the specific group(s) to all believers is included in the mention of the word church. It is not wrong to speak of a building as a church or of a group of congregations as a church body. But the word church in the proper biblical sense means all of those who trust in Jesus as the Savior from sin. And there is only one church in that sense.

ONE MINISTRY

The Lord has given his church work to do. Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work” (Jn 9:4). The Bible calls the work Jesus gave to his church ministry. The word ministry means service. Jesus said, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the

greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules as the one who serves” (Lk 22:25,26). When Jesus was on earth doing the work he commanded us to do, his work was called ministry. Luke writes, “Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry” (3:23). When we believers carry out the work Jesus gave us to do, the Bible calls it ministry (2 Co 9:12).

Exactly why Jesus did not visibly remain on this earth to carry out this ministry, I cannot explain to you. Why he does not call out his powerful, holy angels to proclaim his message of victory over sin, I do not know. Why he does not raise saints from the grave and have them roam the earth to announce his power over the wages of death is a mystery to me. These are the kinds of questions we can ask him when we stand before him in glory. But this I know for sure: he has given this work to us, to me, to you. He has given the work of ministry to his church.

The Universal Priesthood

When the Bible talks about the individual members of the Lord’s church in terms of their work, it often calls them priests. St. Peter tells his readers, “You are... a royal priesthood... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pe 2:9). St. John utters a doxology to the Lord who made us priests: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen” (Rev 1:5,6). St. Paul asks that a believer’s life be one of priestly sacrifices. “I urge you, brothers,” he writes, “in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices” (Ro 12:1). “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). “The gifts you sent... are a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Php 4:18).

It must be noted that in every passage where priest is mentioned in the New Testament in reference to New Testament believers, it is used as a title for all believers. It is not used in reference to public, called ministers. This is why the priesthood of the New Testament is called a universal priesthood. The term universal is not found in the Bible, but the concept is clearly taught. Jesus’ commands to do the work of ministry were given to all believers. The words of Sts. Peter, John and Paul were addressed to all believers, to every member of the Lord’s church. In this church everyone is a functioning priest, everyone is a minister, everyone is a worker.

The Ministry

The work of the Lord’s church, that is, the work of the universal priesthood, is every sacrifice the Lord’s priests bring in thanksgiving for his victory over sin. The sacrifices of Christian priesthood, of course, do not in any way make payment for sin. Jesus made full payment for all sins. “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy... there is no longer any sacrifice for sin” (Heb 10:13,18). So all the sacrifices brought by the Lord’s priests are thankofferings. “He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord” (Ro 14:6-8).

In a proper sense, then, everything a believer does in thanksgiving to God is a part of his ministry as a priest: his work, his rest, his worship, his good works, his confession of Christ, everything! Our life of faith and our death in faith are our priestly ministry to the Lord (Ro 14:8). “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17).

The ministry which the Lord has given to his church and thus to all believers includes the authority to administer the keys. By the keys we mean the authority to use the means of grace, the right to speak the word of God and to administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We have borrowed the term keys from Jesus himself. Jesus told us, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt 16:19). The sacred things of God that not even the angels are allowed to handle are the privilege and power of every believer. When any saint shares the gospel, the Lord stands behind his message to open or close the doors of heaven for the hearer.

Christian ministry is misconstrued or torn from its biblical moorings most often in one of two ways. Either ministry is thought of too narrowly as though it included only the ministry of the keys. Or the ministry of

the keys is thought of as a special part of Christian ministry that can be performed only by trained called ministers. Both of these ideas are foreign to Scriptures. But there is only one ministry. It has been committed to every priest by the Lord. And every member of the Lord's church is a priest.

The Public Ministry

Public ministry is not a term found in the Bible. By public ministry we do not mean ministry which is conducted in view of the public as opposed to that which is carried on privately. We mean ministry that is conducted on behalf of, in the name of, and in the place of other members of the universal priesthood.

Jesus instituted only one ministry when he told his disciples, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). "You will be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8). But it is clear from Scriptures that there is a public aspect of this one ministry carried out individually by all members of the universal priesthood. It is clear first of all from the clearly stated need for such public ministry. St. Paul writes, "How, then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'" (Ro 10:14,15).

It is also clear from the Bible that what we call public ministry was intended by Christ to be an aspect of his ministry. St. Paul as an apostle of Christ claims that God himself gave him this ministry. He writes, "God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Co 5:18). Paul frequently calls himself "an apostle of Christ by the will of God" (1 Co 1:1); "a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Ro 1:1); "an apostle—sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1); and, "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ for the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness" (Tit 1:1). It is clear that although Paul received a direct call from Christ for his work as an apostle, he considered others who did not have a direct call from God nevertheless to have been given their public ministry by God. He said to the Ephesian elders, "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made your overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood" (Ac 20:28).

That the public ministry is an aspect of the ministry Christ has given to every member of his church and not something separate and distinct from it can be observed in two ways when reading the New Testament. Although the public ministry derives from Christ himself, no separate word of institution is given for public ministry as opposed to the service of the universal priesthood. Also, the Bible speaks of no forms of service for public ministers that all Christians do not already have.

The public ministry differs from the ministry of all believers only in this, that it is public. It is carried out on behalf of, in the name of, and in the place of other believers. The public ministry is to be entrusted "to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Ti 2:2). Public ministers are told, "Be shepherds of the church of God" (Ac 20:28). St. Paul asks, "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe" (1 Co 3:5). Paul was sent out by other Christians (Ac 13:1-3), and he was accountable to the ones who sent him out in their name (Ac 14:26-28; 18:22).

We can also see that the public ministry is an aspect of the one ministry our Lord has given to his church and that it derives from the universal priesthood by considering what the Bible says about the call. Scripture says that no one is to assume the public ministry unless he is called by God to do so. Hebrews 5:4 states this truth axiomatically: "No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God." Yet we can see that the public ministry derives from the ministry of the universal priesthood by the fact that God extends his call to a public minister through the group of believers whom he serves (Ac 6:1-6; 13:1-3; 14:23; 2 Co 8:19; Tit 1:5).

Lay Ministry

The ministry that Jesus has given every believer has also been called lay ministry. Again, the term lay ministry is not found in the Bible. Yet the Scriptures plainly teach that Christian ministry or the functioning of the universal priesthood is lay ministry. Our English word lay comes from the New Testament Greek word for people. By rescuing us from sin and making us members of his church our Lord has made us his people. The

angel told Mary, “You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21). It was John the Baptist’s work “to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:7). The early church spoke of believers as God’s people: “Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Ac 15:14; see also Ro 9:25; 2 Co 6:16; Rev 21:3).

The Bible says that it is the work of God’s people (laity) to minister. St. Paul writes, “Jesus Christ... gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Tit 2:13,14). St. Peter writes, “You are... 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” (1 Pe 2:9,10). Lay ministry, then, is clearly a biblical concept. It is everything every believer does in word and deed as a ministering priest for his Lord.

In our congregations today we have come to use the term lay ministry in a way that can become confusing. Lay ministry is often used to describe the work members of a congregation do in assisting trained called servants. We speak of lay evangelism, lay stewardship, lay visitation and lay counseling. What is confusing about this use of the term is that this kind of lay ministry is actually public ministry. Members of congregations who serve their fellow Christians through election, appointment or even approved informal request are actually called for such service by their fellow Christians. No Christian may serve in the public ministry (serve as lector, gather offerings, play the organ, sing solos, be an elder, assist with communion, etc.) without a call from the people he serves. When we call such public ministers lay ministers, we are actually using the secular sense of the word lay. In that sense layman means an untrained person. It is important for us to remember that even though such lay ministers do not have formal institutional training, it is necessary for them to be trained and qualified for their public ministry. Even though the calling process which set them to their work was not as formal (no voters’ meeting, no letter, no installation, no salary), they are called by God for their public ministry.

PRACTICE

The Bible is much more a practical message from God than a doctrinal one. God never presents anything as a cold fact intended for mere intellectual contemplation. When the Holy Spirit moved men of God to write by inspiration he was seeking to move hearts to faith and action. “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Ro 15:4). “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:16).

What is true about the Bible generally is certainly true about what it says in regard to ministry. When the church forgets this, its ministry is weakened and its ability to deal with the real problem of sin in the world is diminished. The state of the church at the time of the Reformation is only the most obvious example of this. If justification by grace, announced in the Scriptures and received alone through faith was the doctrinal cornerstone of the Lutheran Reformation, then Luther’s teaching of the universal priesthood was the practical means of restoring an effective ministry. The darkness of the Middle Ages was effected by locking the layman in a cell of ignorance and inactivity. The powerful light of the Reformation was unleashed when Luther told the church that it was not to have priests but that it was priests. When our ministry languishes today and struggles to meet the problem of sin in the world, can we do better than Luther in seeking the simple practicality of Scripture?

A Practicing Priesthood

Luther’s practice of ministry was the result of his theology. Listen to what he says in his commentary on Psalm 110:4:

But after we have become Christians through this Priest and his priestly office, incorporated in him by Baptism through faith, then each one, according to his calling and position, obtains the right and the power of teaching and confessing before others this Word which we have obtained from him. Even

though not everybody has the public office and calling, every Christian has the right and the duty to teach, instruct, admonish, comfort, and rebuke his neighbor with the Word of God at every opportunity and whenever necessary. For example, father and mother should do this for their children and household; a brother, neighbor, citizen, or peasant for the other. Certainly one Christian may instruct and admonish another ignorant or weak Christian concerning the Ten Commandments, the Creed, or the Lord's Prayer. And he who receives such instruction is also under obligation to accept it as God's Word and publicly to confess it. (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 13, p. 333)

Luther's emphasis on the ministry that every Christian possesses was always on his mind. In 1533 he wrote a letter to the Prague city council about establishing a gospel ministry there. He made clear to them a biblical truth that had been lost in the teaching of Catholicism:

A priest, particularly in the New Testament, must be born, not made. He is not ordained; he is created. However, he is not born of the flesh but of the Spirit, that is, of the water and the Spirit in the washing of regeneration. Therefore all Christians are priests and all priests are Christians; and accursed be the statement that a priest is something different from a Christian. For it is said without the Word of God; it is based merely on man's word or on ancient usage or on the opinion of many who believe it. (*What Luther Says*, Vol. 11, p. 1139)

When Luther wrote the Small Catechism in 1529 he had in mind the practical implication of the doctrine of the universal priesthood. The truths of the catechism were not only and not primarily for instruction by pastors and teachers in the classroom. In the front of his catechism Luther made clear for whose use it was intended: "As the head of the family should teach them in the simplest way to those in his household."

Sacrifices of Thanksgiving

If our ministry seems less than effective in our present world, it may be because there is only one sermon preached in our congregation each week instead of many sermons. Jesus told his priests, "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16). If members of our congregation are not flocking to hear the minister on Sunday morning it may be because the many ministers in our congregation are not sending out their letters of recommendation during the week. St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not in ink but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Co 3:2,3). Perhaps many of our priests do not recognize that they became a part of the ministry of the church on the day they were baptized. Or, as someone has cutely put it, "Too many Christians believe that their obligation to the church is to pray and to pay and to hope the pastor keeps the devil at bay."

We live in an age of experts and specialists. Perhaps the attitude that only one who has been professionally trained can do a job right has filtered in the church's concept of ministry. Religion has become the profession of those who have trained to be religious. Yet the error in applying that logic to Christians should be immediately obvious. Faith in Jesus Christ is a very personal matter. Each must confess for himself in the creeds, "I believe..." No one can believe for us. No one can relieve us of the ministry that is the privilege and expression of personal faith.

One way, then, in which Christian ministry is undermined today is by the terrible shortage of functioning priests. When only one or when only a few persons in a congregation see themselves as ministers of Christ, the world receives a less than adequate presentation of the solution for sin. Luther emphasized the concern each Christian has for functioning as a priest over against his fellow Christian and over against his neighbor in the world. This was clearly a scriptural emphasis. Jesus said, "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Mt 18:15). This is not church discipline in the sense of public ministry. This encouragement to priestly functioning was given by the Lord to every individual member of the church, not to formally called, public ministers.

This is how Luther saw the role of parents patiently teaching their own children the catechism. This is how St. Paul saw the functioning of daily Christian ministry: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who

are spiritual should restore him gently... Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1,2). "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord" (Eph 3:19). "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16).

St. Peter also saw the priesthood of all believers (1 Pe 2:9) as one functioning out of concern for fellow Christians. "Above all," he writes, "love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides" (1 Pe 4:8-11). He told his priests to preach daily sermons to the unbelieving world: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (2 Pe 2:12). He taught the believer how to live as "servants [ministers] of God" (v 16) and told wives how to win over unbelieving husbands (3:1).

Personal concern, Christian love, warning about sin and helpful visitation are a constant topic of New Testament writers to their people. St. James says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (1:27). Again he writes, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed" (5:16). Personal responsibility for a backsliding brother is also on his mind: "My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins" (Jas 5:19,20). St. John echoes the encouragement to priestly concern which every believer has for every other: "if anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life" (1 Jn 9:16).

When individual priests in the New Testament do not daily carry out their work of spiritual service to their neighbor, a tremendous strain is put upon the ministry as a whole. Fellow priests are left without encouragement, without an example to follow. The public aspect of the ministry is usually pressed into service to carry out what is properly first of all the work of the universal priesthood. The teachers must do all the teaching; the counselors must do all the counseling; the pastors must do all the visiting and discipline.

When the whole priesthood is functioning, on the other hand, the whole church is built up. It is built up inwardly and outwardly. The number of believers increases, and the strength of faith of the individual members increases. This positive building of the church that results from an actively functioning priesthood of all believers is often spoken of in the Bible. St. Paul writes, "Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:15,16). The activity of each individual priest is a testimony to the fact that there is one church and one ministry in the church centered on Christ, "the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow" (Col 2:19).

Witnessing Priesthood

The spiritual concern that every priest has for his neighbor finds its highest expression in his witness of Christ. A Christian shines to the world with the example of a good life. He demonstrates his love in spiritual service to his fellow Christians. But the real focus of all that he does is the sharing of the victory of his Lord over sin. He wants to witness. He wants to tell. He wants to confess his faith. He wants to put into words what God has put into his heart.

This goal of witnessing is, of course, the heart of Jesus' commissioning of all his ministers. "Make disciples of... baptizing... teaching" (Mt 28:19,20), "Preach the good news" (Mk 16:15); and, "You will be my witnesses" (Ac 1:8) are Jesus' clear words directing the goal of all priestly sacrifices. Good works provide a context for witnessing. Spiritual service demonstrates the power of the gospel. But putting the message into

words is the final goal of every priest because, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:17).

Naturally, the most important part of priestly work is the hardest part and the most neglected. Yet again the New Testament writers make it clear that witnessing with words of the power of our Lord over sin is a part of the ministry of all believers. St. Paul writes, “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Ro 10:10). The witness of confessing Christ as Lord is the natural counterpart of faith. “It is written, ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken’” (2 Co 4,13). St. Peter, in the same epistle in which he called all believers “a royal priesthood,” urges Christians not to neglect this part of their ministry. “Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pe 3:14,15).

Believers have always spontaneously witnessed to their Lord. When Anna had seen the Christchild, “She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). When the woman at Jacob’s well learned of the living water from Jesus, she “went back to the town and said to the people, ‘Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?’” (Jn 4:28,29). The early apostles when warned to remain silent by the Sanhedrin said, “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Ac 4:20).

When such witness does not happily and freely flow from every member of the universal priesthood, the public ministry of the word is also hampered. Faith in the Lord becomes an isolated Sunday morning experience. When the head of the family does not conduct daily devotions with his own loved family members, the Bible message of the gospel is thought of as something only trained professionals can handle. When Jesus’ priests can work elbow to elbow with fellow-workers and not share a word about their Savior, the good news remains the domain of preachers and missionaries. When witnessing is not the work of every Christian day after day, the visible church becomes bogged down in its concern about pragmatic professional peripherals. We vainly try to make the church grow by program, packaging, building buildings, raising money and administrative projections. Witnessing becomes a business instead of a ministry.

Christian priests must not hesitate to witness because of their lack of formal training. Before he is 35 years old, a faithful church attender has received more hours of instruction from the pulpit than a seminary graduate has received in the classroom. The universal priesthood must be undaunted by the word minister. Luther correctly points out that Christians through baptism usually become ministers before their pastors become public ministers. Every priest possesses the promises of the Lord who has commissioned him to witness. Jesus said, “I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict” (Lk 21:15). “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Ac 1:8). “And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:20). It is with such power and promises that the priests of the Lord go out today to proclaim the victory over sin to a troubled world.

Support for the Public Ministry

Because there is only one ministry, the priesthood of believers lovingly and willingly supports the public ministry. The public ministry is a part of the one ministry Christ gave to his church. The public ministry functions on behalf of and in the name of the universal priesthood. The public ministry has no assigned function except that which the universal priesthood gives to it. Public ministers are called from the universal priesthood. Therefore the love and support which all Christians give to the public ministry is in a certain sense an honest and proper demonstration of self-love.

The most important support that the priesthood gives to public ministers is respect for their message. St. Paul was appreciative of this support from the Thessalonians: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Th 2:13). It is the message that called workers bring—rather than their personalities or abilities—which commands the respect of those who receive their message. “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those

whose work is preaching and teaching” (2 Ti 5:17). We respect them for their message because of the great spiritual responsibility that goes along with their sharing it. So the writer to the Hebrews says, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Since the public ministry derives from the ministry of all Christians, the universal priesthood is concerned about guarding the purity of the message that is brought to them. No church has ever remained doctrinally strong and pure without the commitment of laymen to guarding the teaching of its called workers. So Jesus warns, “Watch out for false prophets” (Mt 7:15). St. John encourages his readers, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn 4:1). A believer’s ability to check the teaching of his called worker presupposes his own knowledge and reading of the Scripture. This was clear in the case of the Bereans. “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Ac 17:11).

The support of laity for called workers, of course, includes the kind of life they live in response to the message of their public ministers. We have mentioned that before. Imitation is the highest form of flattery—and honor. “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb 13:7). When the lifestyle of our public workers corresponds to the message they are preaching, imitating them is really just another way of giving honor to the message itself.

Support for public ministers also includes material support. In fact, neglecting to give sufficient material support may make any other honor we offer them seem rather hollow. St. Paul states the matter simply: “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor” (Gal 6:6). The Bible requires such honor of called workers, “For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages’” (1 Ti 5:18). “Don’t you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Co 9:13,14).

Public Servants

Public ministers of the Lord Jesus will want to remember the meaning of the word ministry itself. The word for ministry in the Bible comes from the Greek word for the work or service of waiting on tables (Ac 1:17,25; 6:4; 12:25; 20:4; 21:19; 2 Co 4:1; etc.). An even stronger word which actually means slave is often translated servant in reference to those who serve in the public ministry (Php 1:1; Tit 1:1; etc.) and in reference to those who serve God as members of the universal priesthood (Eph 6:6; 1 Pe 2:16; Rev 7:3). Public servants in the ministry of the Lord of the church might want to remember other words which Scripture uses to characterize their office, such as messenger (Rev 2,3), fishermen (Mk 1:17,18; Mt 4:19; Lk 5:10), shepherd or pastor (Eph 4:11), witness (Ac 1:8,22), vessel (Ac 9:15; 2 Co 4:7), fellow worker (1 Co 3:9; 2 Co 6:1; 3 Jn 8), stewards (1 Co 4:1), ambassador (2 Co 5:20; Eph 6:19), prisoner of Jesus Christ (Eph 3:1; 4:1; 2 Ti 1:8; Phm 1,9), pattern (1 Ti 1:16; Tit 2:7), soldier (2 Ti 2:3) and farmer or husbandman (2 Ti 2:6).

In order to identify the public ministers in the church, it is necessary to remember what a public minister is and what he does. A public minister has the same ministry as an individual priest. No work can be assigned to a public servant in the church that every private minister does not already possess. Our tradition of recognizing as public ministers only those who work with the word and doctrine perhaps needs some revision. It draws a false line between the work of the universal priesthood and the public ministry. It leads lay people to believe that their ministry does not include word and doctrine. And it leads us to conclude wrongly that those in the public ministry who do not deal with the word and doctrine are not really in the public ministry.

It is interesting to note in the Bible that the same root word that is used in Ac 6:1-6 for the ministry of those who were chosen (called) to wait on tables is used for the work of those who were relieved by this service to give their attention to the ministry of the word (Ac 6:4). Those who waited on tables were not “lay ministers.” They were public ministers. They served in the name of and on behalf of other Christians. The same

thing is true of elders. Most often they are described as having spiritual responsibility connected with the word and doctrine (Ac 15:6,22; 20:17,28; 1 Ti 4:14; Jas 5:14). But this is not always the case. It is clear that some elders worked in areas not touching on the word (1 Ti 5:17). But these elders were also called servants and public ministers.

What is important in this observation is that we recognize all the public servants in our congregations today. What determines who public ministers are is not their specific area of labor, not whether their labor is full time, and not whether their call is formally recognized by installation and the provisions of housing and salary. All of these matters are determined by the group of Christians that asks someone to serve them publicly. The scope of a public servant's work is determined by those who call him to do that work (Ac 6:1-6; 13:13; 2 Co 8:19). But the fact that one is a public servant is established by the call itself.

The honor and respect that we give to public servants derives first of all from our identification of those servants. Such recognition belongs to secretaries, elders, stewardship visitors, Sunday school teachers, organists, society officers, council members, soloists, church officers, administrators, board of education members, treasurers and many other public servants in the church who serve their fellow Christians at their request. In the Bible such public workers are called servants of the Lord along with those who deal with the word and doctrine. Recognizing the public aspect of these persons' work will not detract from the honor given to those who devote their attention full time to the word and doctrine when they understand that the word and doctrine they work with itself gives such recognition. Instead, as all public workers are honored for their service on behalf of their fellow Christians, the importance of the labor of those servants who work directly with the word of God will become more evident. St. Paul commended many public servants who risked their lives for him, supported him physically, assisted with gathering offerings and held worship services in their homes. Yet he asks honor for himself and others who worked with the word: "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God" (1 Co 4:1). Double honor belongs to "especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Ti 5:17).

Clerical Sins

Who would argue that there is a lack of respect for the clergy in today's society? And in these last days we should not be surprised that the people in our congregations to some extent reflect the attitudes of the world around them. But respect is a kind of chicken and egg situation. What comes first, the respect or the earning of respect? the loss of respect, or the failure to merit respect? There can be little doubt that much of the problem is out there. The devil, the world and the sinful flesh of our members have sinfully subtracted from the respect that is due those who labor in the word and doctrine. But the clergy must likewise acknowledge that there is a chicken and an egg. Our three great enemies have caused us to lose some of that respect on our own.

This thing feeds on itself. The more we lose respect for the intrinsic value of our spiritual ministry, the more we seek to regain respect in outward ways. We try to protect our offices. The more we lose the kind of honor we can't eat and drink, the more we seek the kind we can consume physically. The less the laity sees anything special about us, the more we try to create distinctions between us and them. And the work of the church deteriorates to protecting our place from proclaiming our message.

Perhaps most of all we forget that we are servants. We are servants of God and servants of God's people. Our power is from the Holy Spirit. Our control of our people is through the word. Our exaltation, like Christ's, comes through humiliation. We become first by being last. The secular world operates on the basis of power control. But Jesus said, "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Mt 20:26,27). St. Peter echoes that thought: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pe 5:2).

Those who work with the word and doctrine are affected by worldliness just as those whom they serve are influenced by it. Most of the respect we earn will be in direct proportion to our ability under the Spirit to display an otherworldliness. The qualifications for public servants in the Bible regularly include such aspects of

spirituality. “Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined” (Tit 1:7,8). After Paul describes public ministry for Timothy as “a noble task,” he tells him what noble and honorable attributes the minister will display: “temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable... not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money... He must also have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Ti 3:1-7).

Clergy are too often tempted to think of building the church in the same sense as the world outside thinks of building a business. When Paul talks about building the church, he always talks in terms of building people. He speaks of “the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down” (2 Co 10:8). When speaking of the ascended Lord, he writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph 4:11,12). This building is obviously one done by application of the word to human hearts.

Pastors often sense a lack of respect for their office because of the higher level of education lay people have today. The pastor is no longer the only man in his congregation to wear a suit and tie to work. His English is scrutinized by minds bent over word processors five days a week. His administrative abilities are evaluated by corporate officers. His suggestions for budgetary items are reviewed by bankers, lawyers and C.P.A.’s. His preaching and teaching must run competition for clarity and content with Madison Avenue media production.

Pastors and teachers will not want to see this development as a problem, but as a challenge and as an opportunity. The challenge is to their own spiritual and professional development. Paul told Titus that the called servant “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Tit 1:9). Obviously, this means further training and study in the word. “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of (2 Ti 3:14-17). Personal study, professional growth and formal graduate study are not the sole domain of the eggheads, the class brains and the overachievers. They are necessary for competent parish ministry. Our synodical agencies, terminal schools and publishing house offer many opportunities for such growth beyond that which is offered on the circuit, conference and district levels. A lot of frustration, a lot of burn-out, a lot of grieving over the loss of respect is obviated by a called worker’s regular refreshment in the knowledge of the word he is proclaiming to others.

The challenge is to personal growth. The opportunity offered by the higher level of lay education is for their own growth as priests. There is only one ministry. The different aspects of ministry serve one another. The universal priesthood calls, defines, honors and supports public ministry. The public ministry educates, nurtures and motivates private ministry. In this way the one Lord over sin nurtures his one church with one ministry. Paul’s words about the church building itself in this manner through ministry are classic: “He... gave... pastors and teachers to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph 4:11-16).

CONCLUSION

We all know what disunity has done to some of the most talented professional athletic teams. It has torn them apart to the point where they are often competing more with each other than with the opposing team. Can’t we see that this is just exactly what Satan wants to happen to the church? “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every household divided against itself will not stand” (Mt 12:25). Jesus said. And, of course, he was right.

Although it appears in many forms and camouflages its deadly disease with a variety of confusing symptoms, the common enemy we face is sin. Let us never forget who stands at the head of our church. There is only one Lord. The gospel centers on the solution only he provided for the problem of sin. That one Lord has

gathered around him his people, the church. All of those and only those who trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin are members of this one body. To us and only to us has been given the mission, the message, the ministry of reconciliation. We have important work to do. Let us stand together in the unity that is ours in Christ.

In the Table of Duties in the Small Catechism Luther's first two listings are the duties of pastors and what hearers owe their pastors and teachers. At the end of the Table of Duties Luther adds the little verse which the ministering church will take to heart in these last days: "Let each his lesson learn with care / and all the household well shall fare." The key to a unified ministry is not finger pointing but honest, humble introspection, repentance and a renewed desire to serve God to the best of our ability in the ministry he has given us. There is only one Lord of the church. When we seek him for the solution for the problem of sin within ourselves, he will unify our one ministry of presenting him as the solution for the sin of the world.

COROLLARY READING

Feucht, Oscar E., *Everyone A Minister*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1988.

Gawrisch, Wilbert R., "A Royal Priesthood Proclaiming God's Praise," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 7.9, No. 4, October 1978.

Habeck, Irwin J., "A Pastor's Conscience — Reflections on 1 Timothy 1:19," *WLQ*, Vol. 69, No. 4, October 1972.

Habeck, Irwin J., "The Ministry — A Good Work," *WLQ*, Vol. 77, No. 2, April 1980.

Habeck, Irwin J., "The Spirit of Doxology in a Pastor's Life," *WLQ*, Vol. 74, No. 3, July 1977.

Mueller, Wayne, "A Biblical Perspective of Christian Ministry—A Study on Alternate Forms of Public Ministry for the BPE," (Seminary Essay File) 1988.

Lawrenz, Carl J., "The Scriptural Truths of the Church and Its Ministry," *WLQ*, Vol. 82, No., 3, Summer 1985.

Schaller, J., "The Origin and Development of the New Testament Ministry," *WLQ*, Vol. 78, No. 1, January 1981.

Schuetze, Armin W., "Ministering to God's Free People," *WLQ*, Vol. 65, No. 2, April 1968.

Schuetze, Armin W., "The Significance of the Reformation for Our Ministry Today," *WLQ*, Vol. 83, No. 23, Summer 1986.

"Theses on Church and Ministry," *WLQ*, Vol. 67, No. 2, April 1970.

Thielicke, Helmut, *The Trouble With the Church*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974.

Vogel, H., "The Doctrine of the Church and Ministry," *WLQ*, Vol. 73, No. 1, January 1976.

Wendland, Ernst H., "Christ's Love — The Compelling Force Behind Our Ministry," *WLQ*, Vol. 76, No. 4, October 1979.

Wicke, Harold E., "Is the Pastorate in the Congregation the Only God Ordained Office in the Church," *WLQ*, Vol. 68, No. 2, April 1971.