

BROTHERLY ADMONITION THAT ENCOURAGES ACCOUNTABILITY

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For a time I did not even want to look at that passage in my Bible. At least, from the time I received this assignment up to the time I started writing. I knew it was there. In fact, I knew it by heart. I just didn't want to look at it or think about it. But it is in the Bible. It is a part of the inspired, inerrant Scriptures. It is a word from Jesus. So, I peeled open my Bible, and there it was, leaping off the page once again to mock me, jolt me, and pop my balloons – “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b). Jesus does not use the word “accountability,” but isn't that what he implies? So, why do I fear, and at times even hate, that word? Because I am a sinful creature, because I have an old Adam, and the old Adam hates it when God pokes his finger in my chest and says, “Do this” or “Don't do that.” This should not surprise us any more than it surprised the apostle. Actually, he wasn't surprised at all, just honest when he wrote:

If I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does (Romans 7:17-25).¹

We also know where all this sinful nature business and aversion to accountability began. In the Garden after biting into Satan's lie, was Adam accountable? Why hide if he wasn't? But even in the perfect world, he was accountable, wasn't he? What else do we make of the commands of Genesis 1 and 2 – “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over [it]” and “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 1:28; 2:17).

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2005) 1549.

We are accountable as we stand before God whether we like it or not. So, why not like it? Why not approach it from a new man stand point? Why not shift the conversation from fear and hate to joy and delight? Why not enjoy the immeasurably-more-than-all-we-ask-or-imagine grace of God, “grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Eph 3:18-19), and change the way we think of and react to “accountability”?

The advertisement for this symposium raised the question, “How does the Church deal with servants of the gospel who fall into the trap of false teaching or unfaithfulness? How do believers determine these errors, and who among the believers deals with discipline?” and added that the essays “will focus not only on efforts to identify and deal with error, but also on ways and means to overcome weaknesses and grow in commitment and knowledge.”² This essay is intended to deal primarily with that last phrase, “ways and means to overcome weaknesses and grow in commitment and knowledge,” and attempts to answer the question about whether accountability has a role to play in that. The main body of the essay revolves around “to whom” we are accountable with the intention of looking at “to whom” from a biblical and gospel-motivated perspective.

But before we go into “to whom” we are accountable, we first need to think through accountable “for what?” The answer is as broad as the Scriptures are clear. We are accountable for everything. Much has been given. More than much. All has been given. It’s a stewardship issue. We are responsible to be wise stewards of all God gave us. What did he give us? In your head quickly zip through Luther’s explanation of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed. We are accountable to God for all that.

But here’s the best part. God has given us greater gifts than those. Ponder what God gives as Luther described it in his explanation of the Second Article – “He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.” And there’s more. In his explanation of the Third Article Luther states that the Holy Spirit has called me to faith and “in the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens the whole Christian church on earth.” How does the Holy Spirit do that? “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

² Wording from the seminary’s website under *Grow in Grace*.

preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:14-15a). As a redeemed child of God, as a member of the priesthood of all believers, I am not to keep those Second Article gifts for myself. Neither are you. We are privileged to share the good news about Jesus. “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” (1 Peter 2:9).³

Building on that privilege of proclaiming which we have as a part of the priesthood of all believers, we pastors are also called into the public ministry. What does God want pastors to do? “Preach the word” (2 Timothy 4:2). “Be shepherds of God’s flock” (1 Peter 5:2). “Set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity ... Devote yourself to reading,⁴ to preaching, and to teaching ... Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:12-16). “Keep these instructions without partiality, and ... do nothing out of favoritism ... keep yourself pure” (1 Timothy 5:21-22). “Guard what has been entrusted to your care” (1 Timothy 5:20). “Endure hardship” (2 Timothy 2:3). We could list more commands to public ministers, but the whole point of carrying out those commands is that “God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). That’s the bottom line, and the only way that will get done is by his words being proclaimed.

Do yourself and your brothers a favor and study Pastor Jon Hein’s essay, *Treasure in Jars of Clay: the Synergy between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan for Salvation*. Pastor Hein did a masterful job of defining what is meant by instrumental cause (the message) and ministerial cause (the messengers) in God’s plan of salvation and identifying the important role of each. After making the case scripturally and logically that the Word of God works both supernaturally and psychologically (touching our intellect, will, and emotions),⁵ he states:

Let us be clear. Public ministry is *not* the means of grace. The gospel in Word and sacraments bears that title alone. But ministers are the way for the means of grace to be dispensed. We are the heralds carrying the king’s message. It is not our responsibility to make people like the Word. It is not our responsibility to make people believe the Word. (Only the Spirit can do that.) But it is our responsibility to preach the Word.

³ Emphasis mine.

⁴ [my translation] – i.e. the study of Scripture.

⁵ Hein, Jonathan R. *Treasure in Jars of Clay: the Synergy between the Instrumental and Ministerial Causes in God’s Plan for Salvation*. Essay prepared for the WELS Institute of Worship and Outreach. May, 2011. p.6-7 (available in WLS essay file).

Because we said the ultimate purpose of the Word is salvation, that responsibility is great.⁶

If the Word worked magically – i.e. simply the sound of the words of Scripture brought about spiritual benefit, whether they were understood or not – there would be no need for sermons or hymns or trained public ministers. But the Word does not work magically. It works supernaturally. It also works psychologically. Therefore, our standard for faithful proclamation of God’s Word is not simply that we proclaim right doctrine. That is the beginning of faithful proclamation, but far from the end! But because the Word works psychologically, we want to present the Word in a way that is logical and winsome, touching both the head and the heart.⁷

If I preach the gospel in the same way, week after week, the gospel retains all of its life-saving power. If I read my sermon to my people, the Word retains all of its power. Unfortunately, my people don’t listen. I have failed to acknowledge there is a psychological working to the Word.⁸

The Word works... at doing its job. But it does not work at doing our job. Thus, the ministerial cause is vital to God’s plan of salvation.⁹

We know that the means of grace work as the instrumental cause in God’s plan of salvation and that God intends those means to be used. God wants his gospel proclaimed. That privilege of proclaiming has been given to all who belong to the priesthood of all believers and to all who are called into public ministry. We are to proclaim law and gospel, sin and the Savior to all – to the lost and the found, to members of our flock and to anyone/everyone else. Of all the things for which we as pastors are accountable to God – and like Adam and Eve we are accountable to him for everything – this is the main thing. We have been entrusted with the gospel,¹⁰ and God wants it proclaimed not in thin air but to people. You can argue all day about what command from God for public ministers you think is most important or that all his commands to public ministers are equally important, but I am convinced that it all comes down to announcing, heralding, preaching, proclaiming, teaching, telling, saying, speaking, conveying, communicating by life and lip that God welcomes sinners into his arms because of the life and

⁶ Hein, J.R., 2011, p. 11.

⁷ Hein, J.R., 2011, p. 14.

⁸ Hein, J.R., 2011, p. 15.

⁹ Hein, J.R., 2011, p. 16.

¹⁰ “So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). “We have this treasure in jars of clay” (2 Corinthians 4:7). “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

death of Jesus Christ. That is what God wants. That is what God wants done. That is what God wants me to do and you to do as pastors, and we are accountable to God for that.

When we embrace the truth and avoid the truism, then we'll work our hardest both individually and collectively to share God's Word as well as we possibly can, not just because God deserves our best, but because we are the ministerial causes of God's saving work. That is a substantial privilege... and a substantial responsibility.¹¹

That last phrase leads to a consideration of "to whom" we are accountable. It is my prayer that what follows in the body of this essay will be a blessing for us as we consider ways and means to overcome weaknesses and grow in commitment and knowledge, organizing our thoughts and comments around the concept of accountability to God, to myself, to my calling body, and to my brothers.

I. Accountable to God

Rain drops patter on the window pane as the pastor sits at his desk, looking out at the dreary scene. The clouds hang like a gray canopy, filtering out the sunlight and leaving a predawn-like imprint on the entire day. The darkness of the day only added to the darkness he felt inside. He was tired. Too many items on the to-do list: the phone call to the councilman to return; the notes to type about the shut-in's latest "organ recital" describing her surgeries; the bride's seventeenth wedding-planning email, this time asking for the unity candle to be moved two feet to the left to accommodate the train on her dress and pleading for an answer by tomorrow because the wedding is only two and a half months away; the decision about which Sunday school materials to order even though children's pedagogy is outside his wheelhouse; the budget figures, flashing red for the thirteenth consecutive month; the transfer-out letters that needed his signature, reminding him that there are once again more "outs" than "ins"; the synod-mailing about that – and who's got time for this! – every member visit; the phone slam by the inactive ringing in his ears; the kids needing some quality daddy-time; his wife rolling her eyes when he said that next month another evening each week would be taken by a new task force for congregational planning; the Bible class attendance so low that he felt embarrassed to put the number on the stat sheet for the synod; next week's sermon text staring at him, and the only thing he had come up with was "the devil, the world, and our flesh" and "God loves you," the same as he had said last week; Oh, yeah! And his car needed an oil change.

¹¹ Hein, J.R., 2011, p.20.

He was all alone. Sure, the kids were running around like chipmunks, and his wife asked if they could go on a date some time, and his elders said they were there for him if he needed their support, but he still felt all alone. He was drained. He was tired. Then his classmate sent him a text about the seminary symposium. There was going to be a paper on accountability. “Oh, great! Just what I need. More pressure! I know I’m accountable. I have a divine call. I have responsibilities that God laid before me. It’s all there in 1 Timothy and Titus and tons of other passages, too, plus the call form. Qualities that I try to meet, but I know I’m falling short. Up some days, down other days.” What can we say to this pastor? What would help restore him?

The pauper stood before the king, knowing what he was going to hear. He had planned so carefully not to get caught. But the coins that stuck to his fingers from the edge of the barkeep’s counter, the farmer’s eggs that slid into his knapsack, the bruises on his daughter’s arms, and the lies he told the tax collector all came back to roost. How the king found out he did not know, but he did know what he deserved, and he did know that if the king found out the rest of what he did, the gallows would be preceded by the townsquare’s stocks and the prison cell’s rack. He was rotten to the core. The king raised his hand so all would listen, but what fell from his lips was almost other-world fantasy. “I have decided not to punish you. My son, the prince, has asked me to consider his life of obedience and service to me as though you did it. On top of that he has volunteered to take on the full payment for your evil. You are free to go, free to live, free to be a subject in my kingdom.” The pauper fell to his knees in disbelief. Two hands gripped his shoulders and lifted him to his feet. The prince was there, looking him in the eye, “The king cares about you. So do I. I don’t want you to suffer even though you deserve it. After I have suffered for you, I will come to you to remind you that this miracle is true. There’s more. The king is entrusting you with his treasures to distribute them to all in his kingdom who are in desperate need of aid and assistance – the lame, the blind, the dying, the widows, the orphans. Don’t be afraid or worry whether you will be the kind of treasurer the king wants. I will come to you every day to encourage you, guide you, direct you, help you. Go! Be well!” The pauper walked out of the palace a changed man. With tears in his eyes and with joy in his heart, every day was a new day, a glorious day, to live for the king and distribute his treasures. Yes, he was accountable to the king, but that was not a burden. He had the prince by his side, guaranteeing that any slip-ups would be covered by the prince’s rightness, leading him by the

hand each day to more faithful service, modeling for him what faithful service to the king looked like, feeding him at his princely table each day to strengthen him. With the prince's life-giving pardon and presence and power, who would not thrill to be accountable to the king?

I am that pauper. You are that pauper. I am that pastor at his desk. You are that pastor at his desk. The King has layered the Prince's perfect obedience over our disobedience and failures. He has pardoned us by the substitutionary work of the Prince. He has pardoned us even for the stuff we did in college. There's more. The King has promised not only the Prince's perfect record and pardon but also his power. He feeds us with more than an Elijah-like cake of bread.¹² He makes us lie down in the green pastures of his promises and leads us to drink of the quiet waters of his mercy to restore our souls. He takes us by the hand to guide us in paths of righteousness, modeling servant leadership,¹³ equipping us with more than a Goliath-sword,¹⁴ gearing us up in the full armor of God, and arming us with the sword of the Spirit.¹⁵ "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:1-2). How else can we read that passage other than that we as proclaimers of God's truth are accountable to God for doing just that? I get butterflies every time I step in the pulpit, especially when I recall that I am accountable to God for proclaiming his truth. But when I recall who God is and what he has done for me and for all, then the old Adam butterflies flutter away and humble, grateful confidence fills my heart. With our Prince's life over ours, with his gracious pardon, and with his life-enriching power, who would not thrill to be accountable to God, the King?

Moses stood before God and had to answer for his using law instead of gospel with God's people (Numbers 20:10).¹⁶ But God led him to the edge of the promised land so he could peer into it and carried him into The Promised Land of heaven. In the end, Moses was not afraid to answer to God because he knew who this God is, the Lord, the God of free and faithful grace (Exodus 34:6-7). David stood before God and had to answer for his adultery and murder. But God sent him Nathan with a most important message. In the end, David was not afraid to answer to God because he knew that the Lord had taken away his sin (2 Samuel 12:13). Isaiah stood

¹² 1 Kings 19:6

¹³ John 13:2-17

¹⁴ 1 Samuel 17:9

¹⁵ Ephesians 6:10-18

¹⁶ Moses' sin – not saying "we" because God had said, "You do it" (Numbers 20:8), not striking the rock because that was not that big a deal, but using rash words (Psalm 106:33), that is, a law tone when God wanted him to use a gospel tone.

before God and cried out the honest truth, “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips!” (Isaiah 6:5). But God sent a seraph to touch his mouth with a coal from the place where the paying sacrifice of the Promised One was pictured. In the end, Isaiah was not afraid to answer to God because he knew that his “guilt was taken away and [his] sin atoned for” (Isaiah 6:7).

My brothers, through baptism God has ushered us into the Promised Land of his love, taken away our sin, removed our guilt from his sight, atoned for all our sins, even the ones of failing to be the kind of pastors he wants us to be. We do not have to be afraid to answer to God because he is our Savior God. Who would not thrill to be accountable to such a God? “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b). Is being accountable to God a burden, a noose, a two-ton load? No! Covered with the life of Jesus and cleansed in the blood of Jesus, it is a pleasure, a treasure, a thrill!

II. Accountable to myself

The pastor had been thinking of it for weeks and finally couldn't resist. He called the chairman of the congregation. In a Louie Armstrong voice he claimed that his throat was so sore he could not lead worship and asked the chairman to contact the head elder to lead the service and read the sermon already on the pulpit. He left a note for his wife that he had an emergency hospital call and that the leaders would cover the service. Then, before the sun rose he peeled out of the driveway and drove an hour and a half to the area's most storied and gorgeous golf course. All alone he stood on that first tee and whacked his drive two hundred ninety yards down the middle of the fairway. He smacked a five-iron like never before and watched it trickle to a foot and a half of the cup. He birdied the next two holes, aced the par three fourth hole, and watched in joyful wonder on the par five fifth hole as his ProV1 trickled into the cup for a double eagle. That's when the angels, who were watching from their cloud-lined perch, asked God how he could allow such success for this eighteen-handicap, church-skipping pastor. The Lord responded, “Who's he going to tell?”

Much of what we do as pastors is hidden from human eyes. Even if I'm in a large congregation with multiple called and support staff just a stride or two down the hall, who is going to know if I'm in my office frittering away hours on *FreeCell* or flying *Angry Birds*? God will know, and I will know. I'm not only accountable to God but to myself. After all, there is a

reflexive pronoun in “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved” (2 Timothy 2:15), in “Watch yourself¹⁷ and your doctrine closely” (1 Timothy 4:16), and in “Keep yourself pure” (1 Timothy 5:22). When I preach on the talents of Matthew 25¹⁸ or the minas of Luke 19,¹⁹ don’t I have to apply those words to myself first? What about preaching and teaching the spiritual gifts passages of Romans 12,²⁰ 1 Corinthians 12,²¹ and 1 Peter 4? Don’t I first apply those passages to myself? Which leads to the logical question, “How? How do I go about being accountable to myself?”

If I am to be accountable to myself as a subset of my being accountable to God, then I first have to take to heart the Greek adage – *gnothi s’auton*.²² If we have this treasure in jars of clay – and we certainly do – then I need to take stock of what kind of a cracked²³ pot I am. In their book, *The Power of Full Engagement*, Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz make the point:

For millennia, sages have understood that the ultimate spiritual challenge is to “wake up.” In classical times, the Greeks wrote two exhortations into the side of Mount Parnassus. “Know Thyself” is the most celebrated. The second translates roughly as “Know All of Thyself” – a recognition that we must look beneath the surface to find the truth. Other modern thinkers have echoed this message. “It is not until we have truly been shocked into seeing ourselves as we really are,” writes psychiatrist Edward Whitmont, “instead of as we wish or hopefully assume we are, that we can take the first step toward individual reality.”²⁴

What tools are available for knowing myself? A Google search produces 84,000,000 “self-help book” links. Narrow the search to “self-help books for ministry,” and we’re down to 8.7 million. There are assessment tools available that go beyond the biennial form to be turned into the circuit pastor for the district president. The called staff at our congregation began with an identification of our spiritual gifts using the *Spiritual Gifts Analysis*²⁵ by President-emeritus

¹⁷ NIV 1984 and 2011 – “your life”

¹⁸ The parable of the talents of Matthew 25:14-30 is slotted for Series A, Pentecost 24, which occurred in 2008 and will appear again in 2035.

¹⁹ The parable of the minas is the Gospel for Series C, End Time 2.

²⁰ Romans 12:1-8 – *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, Series A, Pentecost 15; *Christian Worship Supplement*, Series A, Pentecost 24.

²¹ 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 – *CW*, Series C, Epiphany 2; 1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27 – *CW*, Series C, Epiphany 3; 1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13 – *CW*, Series C, Epiphany 4.

²² “Know yourself.”

²³ This is intended to be a participle, not a noun.

²⁴ Jim Loehr & Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 153. Dr. Jim Loehr is a world-renowned performance psychologist, co-founder of the Human Performance Institute, and author of 16 books. Tony Schwartz is the president, founder, and CEO of The Energy Project and is also a best-selling author and professional speaker.

²⁵ David J. Valleskey, *Gifted to Serve* (Milwaukee: NPH).

David Valleskey. We discussed the results with one another and offered feedback. We also used *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath²⁶ and did the same. There is also benefit in the use of the DiSC® Profile Overview,²⁷ especially as it relates to identifying leadership styles. There is no “correct” or “best” leadership style. But if you want to understand how you tick and how others tick and how you can best relate to other tickers and avoid ticking bombs, *gnothi s’auton*. A myriad of other self-assessment tools are available, especially as they relate to ministry tasks.²⁸ A better understanding of self answers the questions posed by Stephen Carter in his book, *Pastors on the Grow: Continuing Education Can Improve Your Ministry* and helps the pastor identify how he can best use his God-given gifts, skills, personality, and talents to do what he is primarily called to do: proclaim Jesus.

Who are we as a person apart from our role and skills, without our liturgical garb, formal offices, crowded bookshelves and framed ordination certificates? Where do we struggle and hurt? What excites us and causes us to rejoice? When do we laugh, and what makes us cry? When are we afraid, overwhelmed, relieved, intrigued, piqued, frustrated, light-hearted, somber, or relaxed? What pace of life is most comfortable? With what kinds of people do we enjoy associating? If we could travel anywhere in the world, where would we go? These and countless other personal questions get at the reality of our personal pilgrimage. What in our background has formed us as persons? In what ways have we been changing over the years? What goals do we have for the future?²⁹

Self-assessment begins with questions like that, questions that lead to honest reflection and deep introspection. Good! But it doesn’t take long for the pastor to crumble to his knees, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Luke 18:13), followed by, “Who is equal to such a task?” (2 Corinthians 2:16). What a blessing that new strides are being made in WELS in the area of continuing education for called workers! On the pastor side of continuing education we owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Richard Gurgel of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Since grant money became available in the winter of 2010 to allow him to use half his time as the point

²⁶ Tom Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, (New York: Gallup Press), 2007, <http://strengths.gallup.com/110440/About-StrengthsFinder-2.aspx>.

²⁷ <http://www.corexcel.com/html/personal.profile.desc.htm>. “For 30+ years, the DiSC Profile has opened the door to understanding dynamics that influence communication and positive relationships. The foundation of success lies in understanding yourself, understanding others and realizing the impact of your behavior on people. DiSC focuses on four behavioral dimensions including **D**: Dominance, **i**: Influence, **S**: Steadiness and **C**: Conscientiousness.”

²⁸ For an example, see *You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth – Pursuing Ministry Excellence by the Gospel and for the Gospel, Resource Packet* by Prof. Richard Gurgel, 2011. For another example, see *Pastoral Self-Assessment* by Pastor James R. & Dr. Anne Huebner, 2004 (available upon request). Also, see “*A Guide for Reviewing the Ministries of _____ Lutheran Church*” (unnamed author and undated from the files of Pastor James R. Huebner).

²⁹ Stephen J. Carter, *Pastors on the Grow: Continuing Education Can Improve Your Ministry* (St. Louis: CPH, 1986) 64-65.

person for pastoral continuing education, great plans have taken shape and morphed into reality. A must read is his May, 2011, seminal work, *You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth – Pursuing Ministry Excellence by the Gospel and for the Gospel*. In that paper, Professor Gurgel begins with a sketch of the sad path of the pastor either into “a dull resignation to mediocrity in ministry” or into “the pathological zeal of trust in self and human efforts.”³⁰ He then directs our attention to baptism, to the power of the gospel in the means of grace, to Jesus and reminds us:

Indeed, growing into the ministry into which the Spirit himself has called us is not an end in itself. It is not a proving ground for our pride. It is not in any way a competition with those who share in this holy calling with us. It is rather an opportunity to grow in zeal and ministry skill so that the gospel we know and treasure may be known and treasured more and more by many more.³¹

His essay then points to growth in being stewards of our physical health, growing in caring for our own souls, growth in caring for my mind and hands (growth in knowledge and skill for ministry), growth in managing ourselves in time, and growing in valuing the beauty of the Body of Christ. If I am accountable to my Savior God (and I surely am), and if I am accountable to myself (and I surely am), then why would I not see myself on graduation day at the seminary as equipped and prepared to serve as a pastor, but also as an unfinished product? If I have a role to play as the ministerial cause in God’s plan of salvation for tens, hundreds, even thousands (and I surely do), why would I not want to grow and stretch my ministry skills so that I can use all the First Article gifts (earthly gifts, skills, talents, abilities) God has given me to proclaim Second Article truths (the gospel) with Third Article confidence (empowered by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace)?³² God, who has given me his best, deserves nothing but the best from me, and a marvelous way to do that is to develop my own personal devotional life³³ and my own personal ministry-skill growth plan.

That was Nathan Pope’s point when he wrote, “I maintain that the degree to which a shepherd of Christ grazes on the Word and believes it, so in proportion he derives strength in his

³⁰ Richard L. Gurgel, *You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth – Pursuing Ministry Excellence by the Gospel and for the Gospel* (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file, 2011) 3-4.

³¹ Gurgel, R.L., 2011, p. 5.

³² I’m indebted to Professor Gurgel for this phrase.

³³ Re-read Professor Gurgel’s article in *Preach the Word* (vol 14, no.5) in which he encourages devotional use of Word and finding the balance between being a people person and a book worm.

inner being to model Christ on the outside for all to see. We are only as strong as the food we eat.”³⁴

Stephen Carter points us down the same path:

A personal learning plan rests on the assumption that you as a minister of the gospel are responsible for your own learning ... In your personal learning plan, you need to assess your own strengths and weaknesses as a minister in the light of your context of ministry. You need to select one or two areas for growth with specific goals clearly stated. You need to identify your unique learning styles and appropriately select learning resources that will help you grow. You need a specific timetable for growth and an accountability structure to keep you on target ... A personal learning plan is essential because we learn in so many different ways ... Do you relate better to concrete data or abstract concepts, to observation or reflection, to thinking or doing ... lecture method ... or informal discussion group ... reading on your own or by consulting resource people ... visually or aurally.³⁵

Self-assessment and being accountable to myself will certainly bring me to Paul-like frustration in Romans 7 and Paul-like confession in 1 Timothy 1 (“I am the worst of sinners”) but will also lead me back to the font each morning as I bathe in the refreshing water of baptism’s flood of forgiveness and to the table where I internalize the very body that lived for me and the blood that was poured out for me – the payment for which I so desperately plead. Then it will lead me with renewed zeal to seek resources not just for self-assessment but for growth and for strength and for courage and for change (if necessary). It will also lead me to rejoice in what God has made me and has given me without an iota of “Oh, I wish I could be Pastor X or had the skills of Pastor Y or could be in the greener pastures where Pastor Z serves!” No! Knowing that I am accountable to the God who pried open heaven’s doors even for me and that I am accountable to myself as a ministerial cause in God’s plan of salvation, I will take on the tone of the apostle who in humility and wonder wrote, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us!” (2 Corinthians 5:20), and I will live in the confidence of the apostle, “As to every circumstance I am strong in the one who strengthens me” (Php 4:13).³⁶

To be honest, early in my ministry the concept of self-assessment scared me. Chalk it up to insecurity gone wild. Chalk it up to an Adam-like desire to hide weakness and sin. But a

³⁴ Nathan R. Pope, *Motivation for Ministry*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1993) 20.

³⁵ Carter, S.J., 1986, 46-47.

³⁶ Paul E. Zell, “Exegetical Brief: Philippians 4:13” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 108 (Fall 2011):310.

variety of ministry and personal experiences³⁷ along the way over these past three-plus decades have led me to consider the Luke 12 passage with a new attitude. I don't have to be anyone else, but I can strive under God's grace to use the gifts, skills, and talents he has given me to be the best ambassador for Christ I can be. Souls are at stake. "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48b). Is being accountable to myself a burden, a noose, a two-ton load? No! Covered with the life of Jesus and cleansed in the blood of Jesus, it is a pleasure, a treasure, a thrill!

III. Accountable to the calling body

I recall it as if it were yesterday even though more than twenty years have passed. There was a tap on my office door, it swung open, and in stepped the president of the congregation. "Can we chat for a bit?" he asked. I knew that this was not going to be the dropping of a shoe, "I'm embarrassed to tell you, pastor, but I'm struggling with alcohol. It's goofing up my ability to function at work, and I'm more irritable with the kids when I'm hung over," nor the other shoe, "And my wife has filed for divorce." No! I knew, "It's about me." I had wrestled an alligator or two when I first arrived at the congregation, and so I was a bit gun-shy whenever the president of the congregation or a lay leader said, "I'd like to talk." Yes, I needed to get my insecurity under control, but I just knew, even though this man of God had been nothing but supportive, this was the day a shoe was going to turn into a boot aimed at me. Then came the surprise of my life. He asked, "When do you take time off?" I replied, "On occasion when I've been groggy in the middle of the day, I race home for a quick nap. But I enjoy doing what I do, and there's so much to do. I feel like I have plenty of energy." He said, "Give me your church keys and your calendar." I said, "Why?" He replied, "Just give them to me." I did. Then he continued, "OK! You're not going to get these back till you tell me what day each week you are going to take off, and I mark that on your calendar." Why was I so afraid? Here is a man of God who had participated in every Bible study I had offered in the last five years. Why did I not assume that he had my best interests in mind? ... and all for the sake of the kingdom, all for the sake of Jesus' love being proclaimed.

³⁷ This paper is not the place for hanging out laundry, dirty or clean. But some very dear brothers in ministry, my partners on our ministry staff, and the insightful marriage partner God gave me know what these are.

Is the pastor accountable to his congregation, to the calling body, to the leaders who represent the calling body? Yes, because Lutherans learn to say “two things.”³⁸ We are called by God and called by the church. Perhaps better, we are called by God through the church. But any way you say it, we are accountable to God and accountable to our calling body. Professor Brug lists the passages.³⁹ Called by God: “It was [*Christ*] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastor-teachers” (Ephesians 4:11); “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as *the Lord has assigned* to each his task” (1 Corinthians 3:5). Called by the church: “When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, *they sent* Peter and John to them” (Acts 8:14); “News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and *they sent* Barnabas to Antioch” (Acts 11:22). Called by God through the church: “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which *I have called them.*’ So after they had fasted and prayed, *they placed* their hands on them and *sent them off*” (Acts 13:2-3).⁴⁰

Accountable to God? Yes. Accountable to the calling body? Yes. “Two things,” and both at the same time. If I am accountable to God and to the calling body, as a sinner I surely know how I struggle with that. My sinful side raises the objection, “I have a divine call. If I’m supposed to lead and feed the flock of God, how dare any of the sheep think they can or should offer feedback? By that they would be challenging the Word of God! Besides, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me’ ” (1 Corinthians 4:1-4). But did you notice what’s missing in that objection? If I go down that path, I am assuming that being accountable to the calling body means members who speak to me about some aspect of ministry are being disrespectful to the instrumental cause in God’s plan of salvation (the means of grace). But that is not necessarily the case. The vast majority of members and congregational leaders are interested in aiding me as the ministerial

³⁸ Re-read the entire essay and especially the section of “two things” by Professor Mark A. Paustian, *Unleashing Our Calling: Today’s Christians Find Fulfillment in Their Vocations*, (Symposium on Vocation; Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary; September, 2006):8.

³⁹ John F. Brug, *Ministry of the Word* (Milwaukee: NPH, 2009) 153.

⁴⁰ Emphasis mine.

cause in God's plan of salvation. So, why not shift to "new man" thinking? Why not turn to my Savior in faith and plead, "Help me!" and then follow with a prayer of thanks that Jesus has surrounded me with an army of support. Prof. Gurgel writes:

God has [not] erected some kind of Teflon-like barrier around his public ministers that allows us to ignore anyone who offers any evaluation of our ministry. I am abusing 1 Corinthians 4 if I act as if it absolves me of listening to anyone else who is seeking to help me to evaluate ministry faithfulness. The problem is this: the danger of using merely human criteria for judging ministry ...⁴¹

Yes, it is critical that those who help us are able to recognize the danger of using Corinthian-like human criteria. It is imperative that those who help us are strongly rooted in the Word. Then they can help us make sane and sober mid-course evaluations of our faithfulness both with the means of grace and with our other God-given gifts that serve the gospel. Whenever we are tempted to bounce from pride to despair (and Satan is happy to lead us in either direction), the counsel of spiritually mature lay leaders and pastoral peers can be ministry saving and ministry reviving. At such times their input can be anything but human criteria to resist. Instead, what they can do for us is return us to being grounded in what is really biblical faithfulness.⁴²

Interestingly enough, a pastor has a role that seems to be contradictory. He is to be both a spiritual leader and a Christ-like servant at the same time. How can he carry out both? The key is relationships, relationships with people motivated by and built on the relationship which both the pastor and his people have with their Savior. For example, a congregation will be patient about their pastor's seemingly limited preaching skills as long as they know he is doing whatever he can to improve. But they won't be patient if he has no time for them, if he would rather tell his stories ("Als ich noch in Heiligstadt war") than listen to theirs, or if – God forbid – he fails to respond to their calls for pastoral care.

I'm not looking at my congregation or your congregation through Pollyanna glasses. I know that we have not been called to proclaim Jesus in a paradise-pasture but in a real parish with real sinners, and some of them will pose difficult challenges as we apply law and gospel to their lives and situations (to say nothing of my own sinful laziness, fear, and insecurity that make me want to draw back from them). Part of our theology of the cross is to grasp the reality that "If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (John 15:20). Difficult people make it difficult for me as a pastor to want to take the risk of being open to feedback and input. But put these in the scales: the results of turtling into my own world with only self-evaluation versus the

⁴¹ Gurgel, R.L., *You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth* ...2011, 16.

⁴² Gurgel, R.L., *You Were Ordained for a Life of Growth* ...2011, 17.

risk of fostering a climate of openness and feedback, especially with trusted, spiritually mature leaders. I believe it is worth the risk to tip the scales toward openness and feedback because that opens the door to the blessing of more spiritual and professional growth. When we foster a pastor-people relationship like that of Paul and the Thessalonians – “As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8) – then being accountable to the calling body can be a joyful partnership for the sake of the kingdom. When pastor and people “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3) and live and work together as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved,” they will follow the apostle’s guide, “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have with one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Colossians 3:12-14). When pastor and people keep focused on the mission Jesus gave them to proclaim his love to the lost and to the found, spiritually mature members/leaders who assist the pastor in personal assessment and evaluation will gladly “respect those who work hard among [them], who are over [them] in the Lord and who admonish them” and “hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

The members of our congregations have made a huge investment in us. They contributed to our training through their support of our church body. They support us with a salary and a benefit package. That is why lay delegates at all of our 2012 district conventions received encouragements to continue to treasure their called workers and invest in their personal, spiritual, and professional development with words of encouragement, by guarding the called worker’s time for continuing education, and by budgeting an amount (perhaps \$1500-\$2000 per year per called work) for their continuing education efforts.

Yes, there will be alligators. But the pastor needs to ask honestly if he created the alligator. If in all honesty the answer is, “No,” then there are ways to deal with that individual in love and on the basis of Matthew 18. But in my observation that has not always been the case. In some of the situations I have observed and worked with, the alligator would be a pussy-cat if not for the pastor’s lack of relational skills. How can we avoid creating alligators? “Preach the

Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – *with great patience and careful instruction*” (2 Timothy 4:2). Love Jesus, preach Jesus, and love people, and members will love the message and love the messenger.

I have been privileged to travel the length and breadth of our synod and to visit a lot of churches and visit with a lot of pastors and lay people. What I have observed is that the vast majority of pastors are serving joyfully and faithfully. But there have been instances of a pastor refusing to do outreach because “I don’t like knocking on doors,” and the members were frustrated, antsy to do outreach but having no one equipping or encouraging them; a pastor finding ways to prevent the congregation’s property committee from an annual parsonage “walk-through,” not realizing that the last two things on the moving van should be the squirt bottle of Lysol and the vacuum, and the congregation having to spend thousands to fix the damages and replace the basement carpet because of the animal stains; people fleeing to hear something other than “the same old same old”; a pastor berating the Roman Catholic church from the pulpit on Reformation Sunday instead of clearly ringing out the glorious *solas* of Scripture; a pastor with dandruff like snow on his shoulders, a tie halfway down his chest, coffee breath, and nicotine-stained fingers not realizing that first impressions are lasting impressions; a pastor charging down the aisle during sermon time without alb and stole, crying out, “Let’s get fired up for Jesus,” without previous consultation with his leaders that he was planning to do that; a pastor forging ahead with “new things” like a bull in a china shop without first building trust with his members.

All the hurt and strained relationships that resulted from such attitudes and actions could have been avoided with better communication between pastor and people and with honest, loving consultation between the pastor and spiritually mature congregational leaders, especially since that communication and consultation will be *en Christo*, “in the sphere of Christ,” who gave himself for us. When the pastor functions with true Christ-like servant leadership and fosters a bond of love and trust in his relationships with the members of the congregation, there will be no scenarios such as, “Pastors and congregations don’t know how to communicate with each other. For example, the pastor preaches a long sermon. People make jokes about it. The pastor then says that they are immature and preaches a longer sermon. Then it’s a death spiral.”⁴³ There will be no, “Because I’m the pastor, and I say so.” There will be respect from the members

⁴³ Private interview with a pastor, April 12, 2012.

freely given, not squeezed out of them “because I have a call to be your pastor.” There will be no fighting over control but only open hearts and conversations (2 Corinthians 6:11-12). With gospel-motivated love and support from his members, what pastor would not welcome feedback, support, and gospel-motivated evaluation?

There are caring and careful ways for pastors to receive loving and constructive feedback and encouragement from spiritually mature congregational leaders such as those mentioned in footnote twenty-eight. The praesidium of the Minnesota District has recently developed a tool for this kind of loving pastor-people evaluation and feedback.⁴⁴ In my computer files I have at least six more assessments developed by brothers during an on-line seminary course.

Being accountable to the congregation does not necessarily mean that there will be an on-going open season for “taking shots at the pastor.” Unprovoked snipers may lurk in the shadows. I’ve seen it. In fact, I have witnessed a pastor, who did absolutely nothing but proclaim the truth of God in a loving way and carry out his ministry with humility and joy, receive death threats from members. But for the sake of growing in my service to King and kingdom, I remind myself (and I urge you to do the same) that assessment is not so much about me personally as it is about how I am teaming with the members/leaders to carry out our joint mission of proclaiming Jesus to all in the best possible way. With the love of Christ compelling us, we rejoice in the encouragement from the apostle Paul to his co-worker Timothy and to us, “Be diligent in these matters, give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress” (1 Timothy 4:15). “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b). Is being accountable to my calling body a burden, a noose, a two-ton load? No! Covered with the life of Jesus and cleansed in the blood of Jesus, it is a pleasure, a treasure, a thrill!

IV. Accountable to brothers

A brother in ministry shared that he could hardly stand his circuit meetings because of the *ad hominem* attacks on individuals in other parts of the synod. More than one pastor has admitted to me that attending pastoral conference is no longer a high priority. I asked why. One pastor sounded like this: “I’m not going to conference tomorrow. It’s such a waste of time. I’ve

⁴⁴ Check with Pastor Charles Degner, District President of the Minnesota District. I’m sure he would be willing to share.

got more important things to do than listen to a boring sermon, try to keep from hitting my head on the pew in front of me during the reading of a too-long essay on an article from the Formula, and listen to the kibitzers in the back bad-mouth the synod.” Little did he know that thirty miles away another pastor was rationalizing, “I’m not going to conference tomorrow. Someone is bound to ask, ‘How’re you doing?’ and I don’t want to admit that I feel like I’m failing. I don’t want to hear everyone talking about all the plans they have for their church because I’m just not good at planning. I’m not a creative person. I’d rather stay here, read some more, and make my afternoon visit to Grandma Schnurbardt. Besides, I don’t want any of them to know that my wife told me last night that she’s not sure she loves me anymore.”

The Continuing Education for Called Workers presentation during our 2012 district conventions included these statistics regarding pastoral resignations: 1970s – 41; 1980s – 127; 1990s – 200; 2000s – 176. The presentation suggested that those resignation statistics may be only the “tip of the iceberg,” that is, just the obvious numbers that cover a deeper problem of pastors who have not resigned but have lost their zeal for ministry. In the last twenty years in the Southeastern Wisconsin District alone, there have been nearly 60 pastor resignations – 12% for personal or health issues; 14% for doctrinal issues; 21% for cause; 53% for the “good of ministry.” One wonders how many of those could have been prevented with better pastor-people and pastor-brothers connections and a plan for continuing growth that is supported by congregational members/leaders and enhanced by brother pastors. Continuing education in itself is not being proposed as the cure-all. But growth centered in Christ Jesus and his holy Word is.

Accountable to God? Yes. Accountable to myself? Yes. Accountable to the calling body? Yes. So, why not get help in that? In other words, why not partner with a brother or brothers in ministry who will encourage me in my relationship with God (applying law and gospel to me personally), help me in self-assessment with honest and loving feedback, and offer guidance and models in working with my lay leaders. Give this some thought. God did not design human beings to be alone. Even in the perfect world the whole focus was on their relationship with God, and in that setting God blessed the first human being with a relationship with another human being. Relationships matter. And how much more in the post-Genesis-three world in which we live and especially in the ministry world in which we serve! God be praised! He gives us those relationships with the spiritually mature members/leaders of our congregations *and* with our brothers in ministry. We need each other. If I am not growing closer to Jesus

personally and not growing professionally and if I distance myself from my brothers in ministry, how can I get help when I fall or am weak?

Stephen Carter wrote:

The whole tone of the Scriptures encourages a support system among God's people. Aaron and Hur hold up Moses' hands while Joshua leads Israel to victory. God supplies Elijah with Elisha and other faithful believers when the prophet despairs of his life and feels totally alone. Jesus gathers a band of disciples around him who support one another. The early church at Jerusalem gathers together regularly for worship and fellowship. St. Paul travels with companions on his missionary journeys.

When ministers of the gospel try to live as spiritual Lone Rangers, they cut themselves off from the potential nurturing and sustaining of God's people – colleagues, laity, and family alike – gathered around Word and sacraments.⁴⁵

In an article in *Preach the Word*, Professor Gurgel makes an excellent point for brothers in ministry to stay connected and to support one another by referring to the apostle Paul's example in 2 Timothy. "Read 2 Timothy as if asking Paul this question: 'How important is the support of fellow called workers?' Just note how often in this brief epistle he mentions the impact of their support (Timothy, Onesiphorus, Luke, Mark) or lack thereof (Phygelus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, Philetus, Demas)."⁴⁶

So, how can we better hold each other accountable? Obviously, that begins by building relationships as brothers when we interact in circuit meetings, conferences, symposiums, and conventions. Don't be so quick to tell your story. Ask a brother his. And when a brother asks, "How's it going?" don't just blow it off with, "Fine." Consider responding, "Thanks for asking. This may not be the time and place since we're standing at the coffee pot with others in easy ear-shot, but I'd appreciate a chance to chat about what's happening in my life and ministry. Do you have time at lunch or later this week?" Be open and willing not just to share, but first to listen.

But building a trust relationship with brothers in ministry does not have to be only random opportunities spawned at pastoral gatherings. In May 2009 during an open discussion time at a Conference of Presidents' meeting, the subject was broached on how to help pastors who seem to be struggling. As the conversation unfolded, it struck me that for some time the Conference of Presidents has made it clear that on Assignment Day in New Ulm, they are not minded to assign college graduates as principals but would prefer to assign those candidates as

⁴⁵ Carter, S.J., 1986, 53,54,58,59,64.

⁴⁶ Richard L. Gurgel, *Preach the Word*, vol. 15, no. 1.

“principal apprentices,” that is, principals who would have a mentor. In addition, I was aware of the fact that the Commission on Lutheran Schools had begun work on a program to provide a mentor for every assigned teacher candidate. I suggested that as a possibility for seminary graduates. The discussion led to an intersection of that idea with the efforts which Professor Gurgel had initiated in pastors’ continuing education. A pilot project in mentoring new pastors began in May 2010 with Pastor Daron Lindeman serving as mentor for three graduates. The number of mentors and mentees has increased each year, aiming at the goal of every pastoral candidate understanding that having a mentor for his first three years of ministry is a normal part of a pastor’s continuing growth and having another brother as a partner (some would call it “coach”) in the remaining years of ministry is a true joy. This concept of mentoring is in no way a replacement for the role of circuit pastors. Their role is vital, necessary, and beneficial as an arm of the district president. But the reality is that circuit pastors are a part of the “official” accountability structure of our ministerium, and circuit pastors with responsibility for six to eight congregations and six to sixteen brothers will not have the time to do as much one-on-one interaction as a mentor. Add to that the whole issue of openness, transparency, and safety (that whatever I share with my mentor or pastor-partner will not be shared with anyone else unless he and I agree that is wise and beneficial), and the concept of mentoring and pastor-partners makes sense and can bring great blessings for our ministerium.

What should be on the agenda when brothers hold each other accountable? Besides discussing an evaluation/assessment which a pastor has used with his congregational leaders, consider this. 1 Timothy 3 lists fifteen qualifications for public ministry. Fourteen have to do with character, one with a ministry skill (“able to teach”). A pastor-partner could annually work through the list of fourteen character traits (qualifications) in the original language with a pastor and help him assess how the apostle’s guidelines match his strengths and weaknesses. Godly repentance together with gospel absolution will lead to joyful efforts to grow and improve. Ministry skills under the broad range of “able to teach” that need enhancement would find pastor-partners directing each other to resources and people (for example, within our synod’s Congregation and Ministry Support Group) who could assist in growth and improvement.

But what about those instances when it seems that brotherly admonition is necessary? A brother’s actions may call for my attention in the areas of doctrine, practice, or application. I am my brother’s keeper and he mine by virtue of our call to faith and call into a ministry in which

we are not Lone Rangers but are linked by faith and by membership in the same church body. I am accountable to my brothers and they to me for our doctrine. I am accountable to my brothers and they to me for putting that doctrine into practice and not leaving certain doctrines tucked in a dogmatics text. But when and how am I accountable to my brothers and they to me for applications of those doctrines (for “practices”) that are specific to my setting?⁴⁷ I have an obligation to help him correct a flawed understanding of doctrine and to lead him to a stronger practice. But before I speak to him about an application of doctrine in his practice, I need to determine if my concern about his application is based on Scripture or on my own personal judgment, prejudices, and weaknesses.

Example A:

- Scripture says, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” That’s doctrine.
- We reach out to the lost with the gospel. That’s practice.
- We reach out to the lost in a variety of ways. That’s application.

A man says, “I will not support missions around the world until we have evangelized the United States.” That’s a flawed understanding of doctrine because it creates a limitation the doctrine does not include.

A man says, “I reach out to the lost by ringing the church bells to announce when the Word will be proclaimed in our church.” That’s a weak practice because it fails to reflect the urgency of the doctrine and the variety of ways the ministerial cause in God’s plan of salvation (such as the pastor) can build relationships with the unchurched and gain an audience for the gospel.

A man says, “I reach out to the lost in this community by participating in local ecumenical services.” That application is unacceptable because it overlooks the implications of other biblical doctrines.

Example B:

⁴⁷ Professor John Brug wrote: In the phrase “agreement in doctrine and practice” the word “practice” does not refer to “practices,” that is, it does not refer to customs or adiaphora, nor to particular applications of doctrinal principles. “Agreement in practice” means that a church actually puts its doctrinal position into practice in the daily life of the church ... If a church declares its belief in closed communion, but it does not discipline pastors or congregations who defy the church’s scriptural position, that church may agree with us in doctrine, but it is not in agreement with us in practice. “Agreement in practice” means that a church exercises evangelical doctrinal discipline against those who persist in teaching contrary to Scripture ... With Article X of the Formula of Concord we say, “We believe, teach, and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles” (John F. Brug, “Doctrinal Brief: Agreement in Doctrine and Practice.” *WLQ* 96, Number 3, Summer 1999:220).

- Scripture says, “Confront the erring brother.” That’s doctrine.
- We identify the erring, confront them with their sin, accept those who repent, and excommunicate those who refuse to repent. That’s practice.
- We confront the erring brother in a variety of ways. That’s application.

A man says, “I don’t believe we have a right to say someone is going to hell. That’s God’s business.” That’s a flawed understanding of doctrine.

A man says, “We deal with erring members by dropping them from membership.” That’s a weak practice.

A man says, “We deal with the erring by sending out the pastor and male and female visitors.” That may or may not be an acceptable application. It depends on how the women function in the visitation process.

When determining when and how to carry out the brotherly-admonition-aspect of brotherly accountability, I believe the key is to ask myself, “If I have ‘concerns’ and would like to speak to a brother, is it really a matter of doctrine that is contrary to Scripture or scripturally-directed practice, or is it that I just don’t like his application of a doctrine?” Then I need to ask myself, “Am I making assumptions without first getting all the facts? Will I approach the brother with the attitude, ‘Help me understand ...’ or will it be, ‘You’re wrong, and you’re naughty?’” I also need to ask myself, “Do my ‘concerns’ give the impression that I am questioning whether a brother is using the instrumental cause in God’s plan of salvation when in reality he is a means of grace man, and his actions as a ministerial cause in God’s plan of salvation may be different from mine because of the circumstances and community in which he serves?”

Brothers, thank God for the degree of unity in doctrine and practice God has granted in our circles. We can also celebrate the fact there are differences in our applications of doctrine while at the same time fostering brotherly openness and sharing in order to encourage each other both to remain true to the good news of Jesus and to proclaim that good news to anyone and everyone. What a blessing that in our ministerium there are no bloody battles on whether the gospel is the instrumental cause in God’s plan of salvation! The ministerial cause (the pastor) in this or that congregation may do things differently than I would. I might even consider some of his plans or efforts to be unwise. But then what am I to do about that? Rally my buddies who

are like-minded and start a blog or a website to take shots and call for action? Or do I trust my brother who is different and take a look at myself?

A pastor says, “I don’t want to reveal some of the ideas I have for ministry to the brothers because they’ll just shoot me down!” Shame on me if I behave like I am still in college and put brother pastors down because they do things differently. Another says, “I’ve worked hard to foster relationships with people in the congregation and community and have been blessed to enroll a number of people in Bible information class and confirm them. Then I heard from my circuit pastor that some of the brothers were saying that I must be doing something wrong and not relying on the means of grace.” Shame on me for not trusting a brother.

So, how should we go about brotherly admonition? Talk to a brother personally. Stop the blogs and websites. Trust each other. Pastor John Steinbrenner wrote:

I trust my brothers in the WELS. Like me, they have been trained in the Word by the Word – all blessed by the Holy Spirit. They have been called by God to serve in different communities as gospel-sharers to different cultures – ministering to a variety of calling bodies. I can’t begin to know how they wrestle with the unique challenges in their congregations and communities. I trust they understand our Savior’s mission to preach and teach the gospel to those inside and outside their church’s walls. I trust they grapple with balancing their ministries and family lives like I do. I trust they, like me, work to nurture and reach out with the gospel – doing one without leaving the other undone.

When I hear that a fellow pastor uses different worship styles than I do – I trust their use of Christian freedom and rejoice that they are sharing the gospel in a way they feel is best for their circumstances. When I hear that a fellow pastor is having a pumpkin-fest, a children’s carnival or some other unique gathering – I don’t think for a second that he believes pumpkins are creating faith or that his cleverness can make the gospel more powerful. I know exactly what he’s doing – he’s being shrewd in dealing with his community’s unbelievers so he can gather an audience. In time he will unleash the power of the gospel for the salvation of everyone who believes. I trust him ... I [also] know he has a circuit pastor and a district president. I trust them too. And I trust that should these leaders offer loving cautions to a pastor/missionary that he would humbly take their cautions under advisement ...

As I trust – I also rejoice. Good ministry is being done everywhere in our Synod – because the gospel is being proclaimed everywhere.⁴⁸

“From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48b). Is being

⁴⁸ John W. Steinbrenner, *Outreach That Any Congregation Calling Itself ‘Evangelical Lutheran’ Will Do*. Essay prepared for the WELS Institute of Worship and Outreach. May, 2011, 12-13.

accountable to my brothers in ministry a burden, a noose, a two-ton load? No! Covered with the life of Jesus and cleansed in the blood of Jesus, it is a pleasure, a treasure, a thrill!

Accountability is scary word for some. But it does not have to be that way. With the Lord Jesus gripping our shoulders to lift us to our feet and grasping our hands to lead us on the path of service, my encouragement for you, my brothers, is to fix your eyes on “Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). Then, use your peripheral vision to see the spiritually mature congregational leaders and brothers in ministry who are ready and willing to encourage and support you in your faithful service. Use your ears to listen to them. Take the risk of opening your heart as wide as Paul did with the Corinthians.⁴⁹ Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. And we get to join in the triumphal procession, spreading the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ, serving as “the aroma of Christ ... to the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life” (2 Corinthians 2:14-15).

O blessed ministry of reconciliation
That shows the way to God and brings to us salvation!
Lord, by your gospel pure, you bless and keep your fold;
You call, enlighten, keep; you comfort and uphold.

The servants you have called and to your Church are giving
Preserve in doctrine pure and holiness of living.
Your Spirit fill their hearts and charge their words with pow'r;
What they should boldly speak, oh, give them in that hour!

Bring those into your fold who still to you are strangers;
Guard those who are within against offense and dangers.
Press onward with your Word till pastor and his fold
Through faith in you, O Christ, your glory shall behold.⁵⁰

Soli Deo Gloria.

Pastor James R. Huebner
Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium
Mequon, WI
September 18, 2012

⁴⁹ 2 Corinthians 6:11

⁵⁰ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* 546:2,4,5.

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