

### ***Marks of the Church: the Office of the Ministry***

In the name of him who ascended on high and gives gifts to men, dear friends in Christ: Because the Holy Christian Church on earth consists of all those who are believers in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and because the faith of people is something that cannot be seen, we look for the Church not in a particular group of people, or in a building that happens to have a steeple on it, or in some human organization that calls itself a “church”, but rather in the Church’s visible marks. So far we’ve considered four of them. They are the Word of God rightly taught, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper properly administered, and the Keys correctly handled; the latter being the authority Jesus gives his Church to forgive the sins of the penitent and to retain or to bind the sins of those who refuse to acknowledge their sins and/or won’t repent. We know that wherever these things are happening, there the Church must be because these are the very means of grace by which the Holy Spirit makes believers in Jesus Christ, continues to feed and nourish them in the faith, and also maintains godly discipline among them.

This evening we come to the fifth mark of the Church, which is someone to administer the first four marks, that is, an appointed pastor or minister (a word which means servant). Luther in his work on *Councils and the Church* said it this way, “*Fifth*: The Church is known outwardly by the fact that it consecrates or calls ministers, or has offices [that is, positions] which they occupy. For we must have overseers, pastors, or preachers, to give, administer, and use, publicly and privately, the four things, or precious possessions, that have been mentioned, for the sake of and in the name of the Church, or rather because of their institution by Christ, as St. Paul says in Ephesians 4 ‘he gave gifts to men [namely] he gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, preachers, and teachers. The whole group cannot do these things, but must commit them, or allow them to be committed, to someone. What would happen if everyone wanted to speak or administer the sacraments and no one would yield to another? [Thus] this duty must be committed to one person, and he alone must be allowed to preach, baptize, absolve, and administer the sacraments; all the rest must be content with this and agree to it. Wherever you see this, be assured that God’s people, the Christian, holy people, [that is, the Church] is present.” End quote.

Luther rightly points to the mayhem that would result if everyone in a congregation thought it was their task to perform all the functions of the ministry. You think my sermons are long? What if we took the time to let everybody to have a say? It just wouldn’t work. But more importantly, Christ himself gives pastors to the Church to serve on his behalf in the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Now, part of this goes to the issue of vocation. Farmers farm, barbers cut hair, doctors practice medicine, lawyers devise ways to legally separate you from your money, and so on. In the same way pastors administer the means of grace. That’s what they are called to do. Perhaps some of you may remember that in the wake of a book published in the mid 1970s called *Everyone a Minister* there was this big push to farm out the pastor’s duties to the members of congregations. Typically it happened with the appointed readings for the day, but other pastoral functions were divied out as well. The idea was well intentioned (I guess), but it really didn’t make a lot of sense. It’s akin to going to a restaurant, ordering your meal, and then getting up and going into the kitchen to prepare and serve it to yourself while the cook and server sit on their hands and watch. When this obvious objection was raised, some people complained “But if we laypeople aren’t performing these tasks, then we really aren’t participating

in the service.” That’s nonsense. To return to the restaurant illustration, it’s like saying” We went out for dinner, but we didn’t do anything. We just sat there and got served.” But yes you did do something. You ate dinner. That’s what you went out for. It’s the same here in the Church. We call our gatherings the Divine Service. God is serving you the riches of Christ’s mercy. And he’s doing it through his appointed minister. Your part is to be spiritually fed. That’s not doing “nothing”. That’s what you’re here for.

But beyond the issue of vocation (and maintaining general order in the Church), there are other considerations. The first is qualification. The office of minister is to be assigned to someone who meets the biblical requirements for the office. We read some of them earlier. The pastor is to be a man. Women and children are excluded. He needs to be “above reproach”, that is, not living an openly scandalous lifestyle. If he’s married, he is to be the husband of one wife. Bigamists and serial polygamists need not apply. The list goes on: sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, *able to teach* – that’s really important since it’s a big part of the job. You heard the other qualifications; I want to highlight two of them: first, he is to manage his own household well ... keeping his children in submission, because if he can’t keep his own affairs in order, how is he going to be able to care for God’s church? And second, he’s not to be a recent convert. It sometimes happens that when someone initially comes to the faith they’re so excited about it they’re just bursting to be involved in spreading it. That enthusiasm is good; but to serve in the ministry you need more than enthusiasm. You need a proven track record of actually living the Christian life. Recall the seed that was cast in the stony soil that grew up quickly but got scorched when the sun began to shine. It stood for those who receive the Gospel with joy, but who fall away as soon as there’s trouble on account of it. We don’t want to send pastors into the field who will throw in the towel as soon as they face some opposition – because they will face it.

Another consideration is preparation. We are blessed to be in a synod that requires its ministers to be thoroughly grounded in the Scriptures. The four year preparation involves three years of post graduate study of the Bible in the original languages, along with the confessions, biblical interpretation, church history, and other related subjects. Between the second and fourth year of study there is another year of hands on training as a vicar under a pastor serving a congregation in the field. There is also the expectation that our pastors will continue to study while serving the church both on their own and in the many ongoing education opportunities that are provided. All of this is necessary not only to know and apply what is right and good for the church, but also to recognize and reject that which is harmful to the church and the faith of its members. This was Paul’s instruction to Titus about selecting men to serve as ministers for the congregations in Crete: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

A final consideration is the call. In our circles, anyway, a man can be qualified and prepared; but that’s not what makes him a minister in Christ’s Church. No, following Article 14 of the Augsburg Confession, we hold that no one is to preach, teach, or administer the Sacraments without a regular call. A man can’t simply hang out a shingle and that says “Pastor for hire” or put an ad in the paper that says, “Have Bible, will travel”. No one appoints himself to the ministry; rather a man is called by Christ through a local congregation.

Okay, I suppose it may sound self serving for me to stand here on preach on the office of the ministry as one of the marks of the Church. It could sound as if I’m attempting to justify my existence or my place among you. I assure that’s not my intent. The fact of the matter is that the Church needs ministers to serve its members with the gifts of Christ. Just ask the folks over at St. John who until this last Sunday have been without their own pastor for almost three

years. I might add that in my life I've been served by pastors for many more years than I've been one; and I am still served today by brothers in the ministry who provide for me instruction in God's Word, wise counsel for dealing with difficult situations, and yes, confession and absolution – which I need as much or more than anyone else.

That being said, because I am called to serve you, I ask for your prayers on my behalf that I may be able to serve you faithfully and well. I ask for your correction if I should step out of line or teach falsely or unclearly. And I ask for your forgiveness for any offense or failure to serve you as I should.

My prayer is that we together, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, will make the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. God grant this to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***