

# SHEPHERDING THE FLOCK OF GOD

A Pastor's Perspective on  
the Church and Ministry  
Under the Shadow of the Cross

Pastor Mark Anderson

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“Thank God, a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.”

*(Smalcald Articles III XII 2–3)*

“The devil is a furious enemy; when he sees that we resist him and attack the old creature, and when he cannot rout us by force, he sneaks and skulks about at every turn, trying all kinds of tricks and does not stop until he has finally worn us out so that we either renounce our faith or lose heart and become indifferent and impatient.”

*(The Large Catechism)*

“The church is that community which bears witness to the end, the goal of human life. It declares that that end, God’s kingdom to come, is entirely a gift of grace. Because it is a gift of grace we are set free to live a down-to-earth existence, to wait patiently and to combat all those things which tempt people to betray the hope – the wiles of the devil, the world, the flesh. To be in the church is to take up this battle in the world.”

*(Gerhard Forde, Where God Meets Man)*

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<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS</b>	<b>PAGE</b>
<b>Preface</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Some Definitions And A Bit Of History</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Two Lenses</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Visible and Invisible</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Assorted Outlooks</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The Lenses in Focus</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Implications for Ministry</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>A Deliberate Grace</b>	<b>33</b>

## Preface

As a child of the Lutheran Church, my earliest memories echo with hymns sung in harmony with generations past. The guiding hand of the Lutheran liturgy, and the cadence of sermons proclaimed in Word and sacrament the mercy of a gracious God. Growing up under the pastoral care of my father, himself a shepherd of souls, excellent theologian and musician, pastoral ministry became an integral part of my life and eventually a calling that would shape all the chapters of my life.

The echoes of legacy resonate further. My great-grandfather, a shepherd in his own right, adds a historical hue to this narrative. His altar books, in Swedish and English, sit on my bookshelf as reminder that his commitment to the Lutheran ministry was a stewardship that is passed through generations.

The journey extended beyond personal roots, branching into the rich soil of theological exploration. Along the way, mentors emerged as beacons, their collective wisdom and guidance shaping my understanding of pastoral service. They were so influential I will name them here. Pastor Clifford Bruland, Waldorf College, Forest City, Iowa, who took me under his wing, recognizing that a call to ministry was possible. Pastor Paul Hanson, Trinity Lutheran Church, Moorhead, Minnesota, for whom I worked as youth director my last two years of college. Pastor Hanson was a model of effective, caring, pastoral service as he served a large congregation. Professors James Nestingen, Gerhard Forde, and Marc Kolden, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, who clarified for me what it means to proclaim Christ crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Pastor Carl Lee, Campus Pastor at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, who served as my internship supervisor. Pastor Lee, perhaps more than anyone I have known, embodied for me what it is to be a

“little Christ” to the neighbor. From seasoned pastors to learned theologians, the guidance of these Christian people and others formed the compass that helped me navigate the complex terrain of ministry, infusing my ministry with the theological and practical insights essential for the shepherd's task.

One of the greatest gifts I received from these pastoral mentors was a lived foundation of the theology of the cross. They taught me to not present a distorted, triumphalist picture of a trouble-free, prosperous Christianity. I saw them face the real complexities of human life, the sin, suffering, injustice, and brokenness that is all around and within us. All of them prioritized the ministry of presence with people, sharing both the joys and sorrows of living.

When I look back on almost fifty years in the ministry, and the call to ‘fish for men’, I see that nearly all of that fishing was in troubled waters. Not always crashing waves or disastrous floods but troubled, nonetheless. To be a pastor\theologian of the Cross is to have one’s sensitivities and sensibilities tuned to life in the shadows. For that is where the Evil One, relentlessly pressing for the advantage, constantly appears as an angel of light. This crucial observation has been a deliberate emphasis in what I have written here.

This book relates a pastor’s perspective on the church and ministry. My reasons for writing do not come from a belief that my experiences are different in kind than many other pastors. For despite the fact that pastors think and speak in omnipotent terms, the categories, definitions, or concepts of absolutes, the day to day pedestrian business of pastoral vocation carries on with its own brand of monotonous, worldly sameness. The perspective offered here was born out of the crucible of a ministry defined and illuminated by the theology of the Cross. I am writing from the place where I learned to think and speak pastorally. From the shadows where doubt, despair, loneliness, and the

dark confusions of living are a persistent reminder that the fleeting joys of life will be overtaken by the mournful song of loss and grief.

As a young pastor I did not see beneath the genial, churchly temperament to the ugliness that people thought about, whispered about. I did not see beneath the surface to the deep and sinister roots of prejudice, the malignant secrets and suppressed fears that plagued their spirits, invisible but unmistakable as death. The shadow of the Cross did not fall suddenly. It came as clouds gather, as a fog settles in, as rain begins to fall.

It is common today to hear that the Church is in trouble, adrift without firm theological leadership, skewed by bad theological leadership, absorbed by legalisms, or the allure of utopian fantasies. But any sober reading of Church history makes plain that this, in fact, describes the story of the Church from the very beginning. And if the Church is faithless, contentious, idle, silly, or sensuous it is because we are. For we are the Church.

My effort has aimed to weave together some church history, theology, personal reflection, and pastoral insights. Some of what I have written is the result of what I have read and studied. This knowledge I have attempted to integrate with the deep convictions of my life. Those convictions are rooted in what I have felt, seen, lived and experienced. The integration of these elements aims to provide students with an understanding of their future roles as pastoral leaders to the end that they might minister with the courage to look unblinkingly at the world and know nothing among the people of God, but Christ crucified.

Pastor Mark Anderson

## Prologue

The church council president and I met for coffee. He needed to talk. He was ready to quit. The weight of the conflicts within the congregation was becoming too much to bear. He was a thoughtful, kind person who, as far as I could tell, never saw a need he was not ready to meet or a problem he would not eagerly try to solve. I recall him rather introspectively saying, “These people who claim to believe in a God of love and forgiveness can be so mean-spirited and difficult. Why do people waste their brief span of life on being so petty?”

She sat in my study, her brow furrowed, her eyes filled with genuine confusion. She could not get her head around why there were so many churches, so many interpretations of the same faith. The church seemed to her a jumbled mess. With such a wide diversity of traditions and beliefs, how could she know which church was right?

These two anecdotes point to a simple truth. People can have a great deal of trouble when it comes to the church. Which, of course, is a massive understatement! The countless numbers of denominations which bewildered the woman sitting in my study certainly point to this fact. At the same time, many people have been driven into the church by the storms of life only to be driven out by the pettiness, meanness, and conflicts that troubled my church council president.

So, how do we make sense of it all? What is the Church, anyway? How do we define the church? Are there at least some broad outlines we can start with? What is the purpose or mission of the Church? How does the New Testament help us understand the Church? What about all that conflict in churches among people who claim to have a common faith? And what is the

role of the pastor who is called to care for the souls of that wandering, unruly flock that is entrusted to his\her care?

I will attempt to address these and other questions from my perspective as a Lutheran Christian. I do not presume to speak for all Lutherans by any means. And I recognize that the Christian witness has taken on a wide variety of forms. What I can speak to are many years of pastoral service among the people of God and the frequently asked questions about the church, faith, and life I encountered in the service of five congregations and as an Air National Guard chaplain.

We will begin by looking at some important biblical words as well as a bit of church history. We'll then turn to some foundational Lutheran theological concepts concerning the nature of the church. The historical context and theological\biblical foundations served me throughout the years of my ministry. As we delve into specific aspects of pastoral ministry, we will continue to draw from these historical and theological\biblical foundations, ensuring that our approach to the various facets of church life remains grounded in a rich and faithful understanding of the church's identity and purpose. Finally our focus will be on pastoral ministry in the light of some hard-won wisdom and the theology of the Cross.

## SOME DEFINITIONS AND A BIT OF HISTORY

The New Testament writers took up the Greek word ‘ekklesia’ to give expression to what we know as church. There are any number of words the New Testament writers could have used to describe that gathering of people we call Christian. Why this word? Ekklesia originally referred to a gathering of citizens called or summoned together to conduct the affairs of a Greek city state. The word can also be loosely translated as, ‘those who have been called out’, or the ‘called out ones’. This passive emphasis on being called is important. It points us to why the ancient Christians adopted the word. Their choice was not arbitrary. They repurposed the term in order to say something very important about the Christian community. The Church, the ‘ekklesia’ is not an institution or organization created by men and women, but a living, breathing body of people who have been called, set apart, created by the call of God. In fact, if you care to do some Bible sleuthing, you will discover that the Apostle Paul uses some form of the words ‘call’ and ‘ekklesia’ to describe the Christian and the church, over one hundred and sixty times in his letters! Here is just one example.

“Paul, *called* by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, to the *church* of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, *called* to be saints,...”, 1 Corinthians 1:1-2

Through the frequent use of these words Paul wants to underscore that believers are not self-appointed members of the Church, but rather recipients of divine grace. They are called, chosen, elected. The Church is not a human achievement but a divine creation and instrument of God’s eternal purpose and grace. To put it simply, the Church is the creation of the Word of God.

Beginning here helps us remember that the Church is not dependent for its life on our intelligence, strategies, efforts, or organizational skills. Nor is it bound to fail when we stumble and mishandle the Church and the Word. The Church is built on the sure foundation of Jesus Christ. Bearing this in mind, let's forge ahead.

## **Two Lenses**

When we look back over long centuries of theological and organizational development we can use two words to describe the basic forms the Church has taken. Think of these views as the lenses on a pair of binoculars. Those two 'lenses' are the words 'Occasional' and 'Hierarchical'. The 'Occasional' view, most common among protestant Christians, sees the church as a voluntary association of individual believers. The church emerges when believers gather for specific occasions such as worship, fellowship, service, and learning. The 'Occasional' view emphasizes the autonomy and independence of local congregations. Americans, who tend to be skeptical about organized religion, have favored this occasional view.

The second broad perspective on the church is traditionally called the 'Hierarchical' view. Hierarchical is a combination of the Greek words for 'priest' and 'rule'. These churches have an organized structure where authority and leadership are arranged in pyramid-like fashion, with levels of authority ranging from the highest to the lowest. This Hierarchical view has been common throughout much of church history. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches best represent this hierarchical view, with their organized structures and hierarchies of clergy.

From an historical perspective it is not hard to see how these views of the church developed and have both benefits as well as some serious downside.

The Hierarchical form of the church emerged centuries ago and reflected the prevailing structure of what were monarchical societies. By the time of the fall of the western Roman empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the church had grown into a position where it was able to fill the religious, political, social, and cultural vacuum. The church provided stability, continuity, and spiritual support during that time of upheaval and transition. Monastic communities became centers of learning, cared for the sick, and preserved many aspects of classical culture. In the absence of central authority, the church established courts and administered justice based on classical legal precedents and canon law, expanded charitable work, wielded political influence, and provided moral guidance. The Church, integrated into the hierarchical fabric of society, functioned as a guardian, ensuring a relatively secure and stable environment for both the church and society.

Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians would also want to point out that the Hierarchical or institutional view of the church can be seen as a visible reflection or symbol of the Incarnation, when God became man in Jesus. While this is not the traditional Lutheran view of the Church, this view takes seriously the Christian belief that God is very much at work in this world through the events and structures of society. This visible, institutional expression of the church wants to say that by identifying with the institution and the community of the faithful, the Christian is being united with the body of Christ. At nearly every period in the history of the church, being identified with the church as a visible institution in some form has been seen as an act of courageous faith. Especially in totalitarian societies where the church is persecuted and oppressed.

The idea of continuity is also preserved by these churches. That continuity may look back to the original apostle's and Christ Himself. Or it may emphasize the continuity of forms and practices that have been handed down across the centuries. The important point these churches want to preserve is that the Church participates in continuity with what has been passed on by other Christian communities throughout history.

As mentioned above, this view wants to affirm the important role of church in society. For centuries the church educated and nourished generations of people and played a key role in people's lives in every domain of living. From birth to death the church was there providing practical and spiritual support in every time of life.

The Occasional view of the church also has its obvious strengths. For one thing, these churches tend to use the Bible as the final measure in all matters of faith and life, including the life of the church. This means that the Bible can be used to critique the church itself when it steers away from the biblical message. Lutherans and many other Christians would be quite at home with this view.

Another strength of the Occasional view is the stress on the importance of the laity (from the Greek word *laos*, meaning "people"). The center of gravity in hierarchical churches tends to move upward. The Occasional view serves as clear corrective, keeping things down to earth, reminding the Church that all Christians have a role and are important within the body of Christ. This is clearly what Paul promotes throughout the New Testament, especially in his letters to the Corinthians. Martin Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers would also want to move the church in this direction.

These two basic forms of the Church also have their problems. The Hierarchical view of the church is subject to all the downside we have come to expect from institutions. Abuse of authority, bloated bureaucracy, inefficiency, resistance to change, lack of accountability, and limiting the participation of all members. Also, what are people to think of the church as an institution when its leaders are implicated in very public sin and evil, when moral failings and financial scandals break out in the open among church leaders? Explicitly identifying the visible institution of the church with the work of God can serve to cast a dark shadow over the message of the Gospel and the God who the church claims to represent. The church can appear to be nothing more than a flimsy house of cards or, in the most extreme sense, a cloak that covers evil.

The Occasional view of the church can also run off into the ditch. While these churches often claim to be restoring the simple, biblical model of the church, the New Testament churches display a continuity and emphasis on community that is hard to align with the highly individualistic, non-denominational character of Occasional churches. Occasional churches can oversimplify the Church and weaken or almost deny altogether the sense of belonging to a larger, continuous body of believers. The language of the New Testament which describes the church favors the language of ‘we’ over ‘me’.

The origin of some Occasional churches can also be traced to specific historical or theological conflicts that are no longer relevant and do not represent the teachings and practice of the Church throughout history. These churches have cloistered themselves against battles that no one else is fighting.

When we look through the lenses of both these views of the Church we can get some sense of how they contribute to the life of God’s people. The truth, however, is that neither of the views above do justice to the fact that the

Church is a reality that transcends its very human members, leaders, and organizational frameworks. The individual lenses both focus and limit our view.

### **Visible and Invisible**

In his Small Catechism, Martin Luther reminds us that the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies, and preserves” the Church. Here Luther reflects the order of the Apostle’s Creed which reads, “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church...”. The order is significant. From the very beginning Christians have believed, taught, and confessed that the church is the creation of the Holy Spirit. The story of Pentecost related in the book of Acts underscores this crucial point. Again, the basis of the Church’s life is not our capacities for organization or cooperation but God’s decision to call a people into being according to His word of promise in Jesus Christ. This call of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel requires us to make a distinction between the visible and the invisible Church. Luther wanted to say that on the one hand the Church is not dependent for its legitimacy on external order or practice. On the other hand he would want to say that the marks of the Church or signs of the presence of the Church are visible in the preached word, the sacraments and the visible fellowship and consolation of the Christian community. So Luther was not relegating everything to invisibility!

Just as importantly, Luther emphasized the invisible nature of the Church. The status of individuals as members of the invisible church is known exclusively to God. Human judgment is limited, and only the divine perspective can penetrate the depths of the human heart. This underscores the importance of humility and refraining from presumptuous judgments about the spiritual standing of others.

While Luther stresses the invisible and spiritual aspects of the church, as mentioned above, he does not dismiss the importance of visible signs of the means of grace, such as Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Luther's understanding, the invisible and visible aspects are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement each other. The invisible reality of faith is bestowed, expressed, and affirmed through the visible signs, means provided by God.

Therefore, while emphasizing the importance of humility and refraining from making presumptuous judgments, Luther's theology allows for the believer to find assurance and confidence in the tangible expressions of God's grace through the sacraments and the preached Word. The focus on faith and the invisible church is not intended to diminish the significance of these visible, tangible gifts, but rather to deepen our understanding and provide assurance that the work of the Holy Spirit underlies them.

## **Assorted Outlooks**

I have gone to some length to outline these two views of the Church because church membership today includes people from a wide variety of Christian backgrounds. From the pastoral perspective it is important to recognize that these two basic views of Church can coexist across a wide continuum even within a congregation.

There are church members who look to the reliability of the organizational and leadership structure of the congregation. These folks actually prefer a hierarchical structure. Traditional forms of church organization, the liturgical form of worship, can provide stability in what is often an unstable, even chaotic world. Of course, if stability, continuity, and

structure dominate, then stagnation may set in. Church members who overvalue this approach can often be obstacles to necessary change.

At the same time there are those church members who value change and innovation. They are comfortable with a more loosely organized, occasional, less structured congregational environment. Flexibility and adaptation are high values. These church members can be helpful in establishing new ground, opening new avenues for mission. They can breathe new life into established practices, methods, and approaches to ministry. They recognize that the changing landscape of society and cultural necessities may require new approaches. But a desire for this approach may also conceal a restlessness that is uncomfortable with all traditional forms and organization to the point of failing to see the value in them.

These different perspectives may have to do with theology and one's view of the bible to be sure. But as often as not it can simply be a matter of temperament, upbringing, and personal experience. A danger here is that strong-willed individuals who only value their perspective may attempt to invade the leadership of the congregation, monopolize the decision-making process, and steer everything in one direction. People can hold strong beliefs and feel deeply about these matters. This is something I witnessed and had to deal with as a pastor.

### **The Lenses in Focus: A Third View**

While the hierarchical and occasional models are helpful in understanding the dynamics of the Church, Martin Luther can help us bring both lenses into focus. Something that is easily missed is that Luther did not set out to redefine the church from the ground up. He was not a radical aiming to

blow up the institution! At the same time he was obviously not simply going along with the status quo. Martin's efforts were informed and driven by his renewed understanding of God. The same God he had been taught to 'fear, love and trust' by his Roman Catholic faith. Remember, all the elements for reform that Luther took up (including the Bible) were already present within the Roman Church of which he was a faithful member. In his famous 95 Theses, for example, Luther reflected both his deep concern for the Church he loved and his willingness to speak boldly, pointedly, even radically about matters that concerned the truth of the Gospel, for the sake of the Church.

Luther had much to say about many aspects of church life; organization, the clergy, the laity, sacraments and so forth. But none of these were the foundation point for his reform efforts. What was? The message. The message of the Gospel was the foundation, the basis for all his work of reform. It has been said, and with some justification, that what Luther was actually aiming at was the reformation of the preaching of the church. Like a conductor committed to the music and the musicians, Luther was tapping the podium to get the attention of a very out of tune orchestra! For Luther, the message of the Cross is the most important thing about the Church.

Unlike the radical reformers of his time, Luther was very willing to retain traditional practices and forms as long as they did not stand in the way of the message of the gospel and faith. He was not advocating that abstract ideas, utopian schemes, or political resentments be allowed to overwhelm practical wisdom. Luther knew that just because a practice or form was ancient and a part of the tradition of the church did not make it necessarily good or bad. He did not advocate change for the sake of change. He fully realized that the Holy Spirit had been very much active in the life of the church right up to the present. His willingness to retain many traditional worship forms and practices

reflected this view. Luther also recognized the deep self-interest that can disguise itself in the costume of religious conviction, piety, and enthusiasm. This is something pastors need to keep well in mind.

This tendency to be a conserving reformer also reflected Martin's keen pastoral sense when it came to the lay people of the church. The reckless, restless spirit of the radical protestants was fanning the flames of resentment and bitterness, sweeping people up into a firestorm of rebellion, bloodshed, and hatred. Luther's reforming spirit was motivated, after a long personal struggle, by the forgiving merciful, loving, and justifying grace that had found him in the Gospel. His concern was not the destruction of the church or society but the care of souls, the reform and renewal of church and society. Luther undoubtedly knew that once the moorings of tradition have been cast off, they cannot be reattached easily, if at all. He did want to clear away obstacles so that the Roman Church, with renewed clarity, might proclaim the Gospel of justification by grace through faith apart from the works of the law. Luther, like the Apostle Paul before him, was calling for the message of the Cross, the mercy and forgiveness of God, to be brought back into the center.

But Luther was no iconoclast. He could be extreme and bombastic in his language, to be sure! At the same time he approached the whole matter of the Christian life with a pastoral patience and understanding that is not always appreciated. There were limits to tolerable dissent. He knew that many of the religious practices of the laity were of spiritual value. Luther's evangelical and practical approach to ministry was a direct result of his freedom as a Christian. He was captive to the Word of God. Everything else could be viewed with a practical flexibility. What mattered most was that the Gospel was proclaimed, and the sacraments were administered in accordance with the Gospel. Luther would have said a hearty, 'Jawohl!' to these words from Gerhard Forde.

“Where the gospel message of freedom and hope is proclaimed, where it is given to you and sealed by the sacramental action, there you are reached and touched by the true church. What is hidden is revealed! The true church is made up by those liberated by the good news. It is the communion of believers, the bearer of the proclamation of freedom and hope.” (*Gerhard Forde, Where God Meets Man*)

When the message of the Cross handed over in Word and sacrament is at the center of the church’s life, there is the true church. Forms and traditions of the church take a supporting, flexible role. They remain important but only in so far as they support the liberating message of the Crucified and Risen Jesus.

I spent many hours around church council tables working with folks who advocated an overly functional use of forms and practices. When this happens whatever works has the highest value. Any technique that gets more people in the door, no matter how ‘gimmicky’ is acceptable. Any program that raises money, or gets people in the door, however legalistic, is adopted even if it undercuts and qualifies the gospel and the message of God’s free grace.

At the same time, while respecting the historical foundations of the Church, the authentically evangelical pastor is open to adaptation and innovation. This flexibility, rooted in Christian freedom, allows for a more responsive engagement with contemporary challenges and the diverse needs of the congregation. This approach reflects a commitment to the living nature of Christian faith, allowing the pastor to be a shepherd who guides the flock with a balance of conviction, compassion, and adaptability. The pastor is empowered to prioritize the well-being of the congregation in the light of the Gospel.

The pastor can assist the congregation in navigating these waters by being mindful of an important question. Whose interests are actually being advanced by our organizational model ours, or that of the Gospel? When we make the message of the Cross the center, the focus, allowing it to calibrate our life in the church, the desire to be flexible is tempered by a clear awareness of the radicality of sin. Which is another way of saying, the persistent influence of selfish interests.

The established and enduring practices of the evangelical Lutheran church developed over many centuries. This means that a truly evangelical ministry will lean toward order and stability, not novelty. And we should make no apology for this. The church should not be made an accomplice as pop culture spurs people on in their restless need to reinvent and entertain themselves. The restless need for innovation should not be equated with Christian freedom or casually equated with the work of the Holy Spirit! That restlessness is better addressed by therapy! Theologians of the cross are not the antagonists of tradition but its advocates. They proclaim the living future in Christ, and they are guardians of “the faith delivered to the saints.”

## **DAD’S ‘MIC DROPS’: IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY**

Now let’s turn to pastoral ministry and discuss some of the implications. When I completed seminary training my father and I had several of those ‘heart to heart’ conversations. But those conversations were not about father and son stuff, not exactly. My dad had served as a chaplain’s assistant in World War II. He ministered to soldiers exhausted by the rigors of battle, brought consolation to the wounded and dying, and wrote painful letters to the families of the dead. After the war he was ordained and served as a chaplain in the regular Air Force

and Air National Guard. He also served as a parish pastor and a national church executive. In the last years of his ministry he was the chief of Air National Guard Chaplains at the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. He retired a brigadier General. There was a wealth of experience and wisdom in my father that mentored me through my almost five decades of pastoral ministry. Let me lay out a few of the pastoral ‘mic drops’ my dad shared with me and that served me well.

**“Preach the Cross. The pulpit is too important for anything else.”**

A classmate of mine served a congregation that had an old school, European style pulpit. A small flight of steps led up to the preaching platform. To get to it, you had to go through a locked doorway. The called pastor of that congregation was the only person permitted to have a key. The symbolism is brilliant!

Every pastor is faced with the challenge of keeping the central things central. We are called, after all, to take people more seriously than they take themselves when it comes to the faith. This is not a criticism. It is a statement of reality. Because of sin and the entanglements of life, people will look to the church (as people have always looked to religion) to provide remedies and therapies. It can’t hurt to get God on your side, right? People can be tempted to expect the church to provide easy answers and solutions to life’s problems. Pastors can also be seduced by these temptations. As I mentioned above the personal beliefs, agendas, and cultural expectations of both pastor and people can be found at times to be at odds with the ministry and the progress of the gospel.

After all, the consumerist mindset of our society is not checked at church door on Sunday morning! Sermons that provide life coaching, tips for personal growth, and self-improvement may be well-received, but they are ill-advised. Of course people are looking for tangible advice and actionable solutions with regard to life's issues and problems. I know I do! But we do not address the human condition on the basis of God's Word when we turn preaching into a motivational speech!

I was sometimes asked, confronted actually, as to why I did not use sermons to give advice or recommend solutions to life problems. These were good teaching moments, and I welcomed the question! My response was to point out that, apart from the obvious fact that I lacked competency to speak to any number of issues, all matters of practical and social concern in this life are under the realm of the law. They belong to what Luther called the 'Kingdom on the Right'. This kingdom encompasses politics, law, social institutions, concern for the common good and so forth. The law governs here. As Christians we are free to pursue all kinds of solutions and remedies.

Let's say, for example, a member of the congregation is concerned about some practical matter of common concern. My recommendation was to grab some coffee after church, find a few others who share your concern, and have a conversation about how this concern might be addressed. Maybe form a committee! This can be done in collaboration with other Christians or anyone, for that matter. No religious sensibility is necessary to seek solutions under the law.

What God's law lays out does describe a great life – if only we could live it! But we cannot. In preaching, however, the job of the law is not to serve as a life coach. Most people listen to a steady diet of law or motivational preaching

patiently, wearily, until they become overwhelmed by resignation. They may put up a good front, but they know that no matter how hard they try, they fall short. The word of the law comes in preaching to show us our need, to tell the truth about how things actually are. The proclamation of God's Law, therefore, is not a prescription for a successful life if only we would try harder. The job of the preacher is to take up the law not as the instrument of success and righteousness. God uses the law to expose and uproot any appeal we might make to righteousness in the law to the end that we might hear the Good News that our righteousness is in Christ alone.

**“You are a dead man preaching to dead people.”**

When the pastor looks out at the congregation we are looking at the baptized. They have died and their lives are now hidden with Christ, to paraphrase St. Paul. From the vantage point of the pulpit, as hard as it may be, we must see people of all ages who in the end have no prospects! Some may perceive this as overly negative. But positive and negative are not the proper terms through which Christians understand life. Those two words appear nowhere in Scripture. Baptism teaches us that death and life, sin and forgiveness, cross and resurrection define our lives as Christians. And, as the Apostle Paul teaches us in Romans 6, the first word of baptism's promise is that we have died with Christ. Beginning with this awareness has a number of implications for the pastor.

Viewing life from baptism's beginning, from the viewpoint of dying with Christ, reminds the pastor that he\she has met the same fate as all the baptized. We have died! It is in this respect that we can say that the pastor is a dead person preaching to dead people. But what word do we preach to the dead?

What word can the dead proclaim to the dead? For death judges us and all the actions of our lives. Death cuts the cord of progress and leaves every life incomplete. The Word we proclaim is the Word of life, of faith. The proclamation of the gospel is from faith to faith. Death is behind us because the Cross happened in history. The tomb is empty. There is a certain humility in this knowledge, a humility stemming from gratitude that in baptism's promise, God has taken us out of our own hands. Both our death and life belong to and are complete in Jesus Christ.

**“The people will resist Cross-centered proclamation.”**

Pastors are called to proclaim the Gospel, to know “nothing but Christ crucified”, emphasizing that salvation comes by grace through faith alone apart from even our best efforts in the earthly kingdom as we live under the law. On the Cross, Jesus finished the work of salvation. There is nothing left for us to do, no little bit of good works or anything else to add to Christ's work. As I stated above, staying on this message and not flinching is among the most difficult tasks of the pastoral calling. Why? Here are a number of resistance factors that my dad and I encountered as pastors.

People, and that includes the pastor, are the objects of cultural conditioning and are deeply influenced by values such as self-reliance and merit-based success. Many Christians and others have grown up in religious traditions where they have been taught that keeping rules, believing the right doctrine, following strict traditions, and pursuing moral perfection are the means by which we improve ourselves and find favor with God. It is difficult for some to let go of this legalistic mindset and the belief that one must ‘earn’ God's acceptance. The message that God simply gives, bestows the greatest of

all gifts through Christ is counter-cultural and offensive in a society that believes there is no free lunch but that there is a free will! What many expect the preacher to do is motivate that so-called free will to greater heights of productivity, morality, and prosperity. To “do the right thing” in every way!

A more subtle but nonetheless dangerous response to the preaching of the Cross is the fear of what is known as ‘antinomianism’ (literally, ‘anti-lawism’). Simply put, ‘antinomianism’ is the fear that grace alone will lead to moral laxity and complacency with regard to law. Paul anticipated this objection in his letter to the Romans where he wrote, “So then should we continue in sin so grace will abound?” The temptation here is to attempt a balance between faith and works, allowing the law to serve as a guide in directing Christian living, so we do not get carried away by grace! This attempt is sometimes called the ‘third use of the law’. But we do not preach a balance between law and gospel. Christians are not circus acrobats walking a tightrope between faith and works! The Gospel is the end of the law and works righteousness for faith. Getting carried away by grace is actually quite a good thing!

This struggle between the old sinner in each of us and the new person in Christ is a burden we must carry in this life. This personal struggle with the old sinner can actually be amplified by the message of free grace and acceptance to the point where it becomes difficult and dispiriting. I spent many hours in the church study with dearly beloveds in Christ who ruled tyrannously over themselves, believing more firmly in their sins than in their Savior! The sense of personal failure can be tightly bound to the belief that I must atone, in some way, for my failures. Quite counterintuitively, Christians who are deeply burdened by guilt and shame can put up the greatest resistance to the Word of grace and forgiveness.

For others the purpose of religion is to help them move away from vice and toward virtue. Abandoning the joys and freely embraced obligations of living in the pursuit of a joyless morality is not confined to medieval cloisters! A congregation will serve the same purpose nicely. But when the faith is set in moral terms the self can turn on itself. The appearance of sincerity can mask fakery. Apparently virtuous behavior can conceal the basest motives. Moral indignation can hide a morass of iniquity.

While this move toward a stabilizing morality is to be recommended in the personal life and the wider affairs of living, which must be lived under the law, it is not the Gospel. For Luther, as Paul before him demonstrated, the life of faith is not a move from vice to virtue but from virtue to grace. The paradox of sin and grace is resolved in the Cross and not in moral or legal efforts to balance all the complex forms of social adjustment. Expecting moral virtue to improve the life of faith is like watering concrete and expecting grass to grow!

Still others want to equate the church with various forms of nationalism. When the ambitions of Christian communities become openly political (and politics is all in the law) they actually drive toward a form of syncretism which blends religion and politics, adopting a form of paganism which the church claims to reject! The doctrine of the two kingdoms is helpful at this point. Both pastor and people do well to remember that the kingdom of God will not be realized here. Whatever form our piecemeal political solutions may take or however beneficial our reforms or even revolutions may be, they will always remain poor, unsatisfactory reflections of what human society could have been. Political remedies are the concern of all of us as citizens of the right hand kingdom. At the same time, they are all under the judgment of the Cross.

But by far the most common characteristic of resistance that all people exhibit in relation to the free, unmerited grace of God, including pastors, is the desire to be in control, to be in charge, the desire to be God. It is extremely useful to remember that the only candidates for pastors and church members are sinners! The serpent's alluring temptation still resonates; "You will be like God." The old sinner in each of us resists the message of grace and the all-sufficient role of faith. This is more true and less obvious than is often comfortable to admit. For that means I am ultimately dependent on God's will and not my own.

Someone once wrote that the human will is a dark forest full of ferocious wildlife. There is no force more potent, dynamic, or destructive than the bound will in its misguided assertion of freedom. This deep desire to have life on my terms runs far deeper than any self-therapeutic, psychological, or cultural reason for resisting grace. This is a perverse freedom which looks on all surrounding life as no more than a means to its survival. As stated above the preacher of the Cross is not preaching to free wills trying to be freer.

The preacher of the Cross is proclaiming the freeing message of the Gospel to bound wills who resist the grace of God in the blinded belief that they actually have a free will! Recognizing this is important because the Word the pastor is called to bring is one of redemption and not therapeutic or political advice. Therapy and problem solving, as beneficial as they may be, are in the law. The pulpit is not a therapist's couch. Nor is it a platform to advance political agendas. It is the place where a Word is proclaimed which transcends earthly remedies. The message of the Gospel is the message which brings baptism's promise that sin, death, and evil have been defeated on the Cross and now the Christian is alive in Christ and on His terms!

All of the above are exhibited in the lives of those who come week after week to hear the Christian message. Whether they are struggling silently or quite openly, all Christian people are carrying an array of problems, biases, and expectations. Some are grappling with financial difficulties or are living in strained relationships. Others are blinded by the glare of affluence. Still others are battling with losses, illnesses, fear, and guilt. The demoralizing complexity of modern life can leave people feeling vulnerable, bewildered, insecure, and powerless. Profoundly unsure of anything save their own impressions, their prejudices, passions, and self-interest are always at work. They sit among their fears as storms shake the world.

To soberly recognize and deal with this wide array of needs, biases, and expectations is a crucial and significant dimension of what it means to minister out of the conscience created by the theology of the Cross. The pastor dares to “call a thing what it is”, to see things for what they are, to sift the true from the false, the virtuous from the vicious, the lasting from the fleeting, to bring the hearer of God’s Word face to face with the depth of sin and the lastingness of God’s mercy.

### **“Nothing Works.”**

The pastor always runs the risk of allowing the very real human responses to the world we see in ourselves and our congregations, to set the agenda. What is practically possible and doable become the focus. We look to fortifying ourselves with solutions that ‘work’. We may be tempted to pile program upon program in the effort to bring about various remedies for success as we define the term. This pragmatic, solution-oriented way of life is very much at play in American churches. In America, it is tempting to portray

God as the servant of those who work hard and want to succeed. Big churches are equated with success. Small churches have the wrong business plan!

In response to this temptation the role of the pastor is to bring that Word of God's Law and God's Gospel which interrupts and interferes with our self-made projects. There can be no peaceful coexistence, no 'modus-vivendi' between sin's self-will and God's gracious will.

In this respect, the hard truth is that the goal of preaching and pastoral work is not to provide conservative, progressive, or revolutionary solutions to set the world aright. The goal of preaching and pastoral ministry is to clearly and without equivocation say what is always and everywhere harmful, destructive, wrong, and sinful. To place every hearer under the profound scrutiny of God's unbending Law. Then, when everyone and everything have been brought to nothing, and all human enterprise is exposed as aimless innovation we have arrived at the Word of the Gospel, the Cross of Jesus, the New Creation, the forgiveness of sins, the sanctification of grace by faith alone. Then, we may deliver the goods! The forgiveness, assurance, consolation, hope, and comfort that are in the Word who is Jesus Christ!

**“The congregation is not your personal playground. You are keeping watch. Someone was there before you, someone will follow you.”**

When the pastor's own interests take precedence over the well-being of the congregation, it can create an environment of spiritual neglect and apathy, eroding trust, and respect. This temptation is real and always present. Sometimes this drift into personal concern is not deliberate. We all lose control of our lives from time to time. Personal matters become paramount to the

point where there is hardly room for anything else. That is not the same thing as calculated self-interest.

The deference shown to pastoral leadership can lead to an overreaching of authority and influence within the congregation. There is no question that pastors can make 'heavy suggestions! But there is no excuse for avoiding collaboration and consultation with the congregation. Such behavior can set a poor example, undermining the values of humility, service, and selflessness that are central to Christian leadership. Ultimately, treating a church as a personal playground can lead to a loss of credibility and effectiveness in ministry, hindering the church's ability to fulfill its mission and serve the community effectively.

However formally or informally a congregation is structured, the pastor serves in a lineage of spiritual leadership who have served the congregation across time. Recognizing this can provide a sense of connection to the larger community of faith and foster a deeper appreciation for the wisdom and experiences of those who have come before. In my case, I was blessed with a host of pastor mentors. Their helpful and positive influence on my ministry has been immeasurable.

My first call was as an associate in a large, midwestern church with a long history. Oil paintings of all the senior pastors who had served that congregation hung in the narthex. Those portraits were sobering reminders that each of us has a pastoral expiration date! Pastors serve a specific congregation for a finite period of time. There were predecessors and there will be successors. I keep photos of my late father and my great-grandfather close at hand. They were both Lutheran pastors. Realizing that I am part of a larger narrative in the life of the community fosters a sense of humility and deepens my awareness that

ministry is a stewardship. Part of that stewardship is recognizing that we have a responsibility to faithfully carry on the work of those who came before, keeping those central things central, while also being mindful of those who will come after. Subjecting congregational traditions to scrutiny solely through the lens of self-interest can have a negative impact on the communal fabric and spiritual well-being of the congregation. A more responsible pastoral approach considers the broader implications and significance of these traditions. Good pastoral stewardship encourages a focus on continuity and faithfulness, with the knowledge that one day the torch of spiritual leadership will be passed on.

## **A DELIBERATE GRACE**

I entered the ministry a young man believing that something was still possible. Then I had my first funeral. The senior pastor was away. The phone at the parsonage rang. On the other end was the panicked, desperate voice of a young girl who had left my confirmation class minutes before. She and her brother had just cut down their father's lifeless body. They found him hanging in the garage. I hung up the phone in shock. Only a few days before I sat in their living room speaking with him. He spoke of a life and troubles that, frankly, I could not even imagine. I mouthed something pastoral sounding and said a prayer. I remember walking away from their home relieved to be out of there and praying that my life would never take such a disastrous course. Less than a week later I was rudely awakened to just how disastrous a course many must walk, and I would need to walk not away from them but with them. I knew the theology of the Cross. I was beginning to learn what it was to minister in the shadow of the Cross.

When our Lord Jesus promised, “In the world you will have trouble...”, this was no off-hand remark referring to the little speed bumps and mild discomforts along the way. He was making clear that the world is a hard, often cruel, and always troubling place. No one goes through this life so inconspicuously that trouble does not take notice and find a way to interfere and disrupt. Which is another way of saying that sin is the matrix of our existence. In spite of all our attempts to dress it up, life has been largely robbed of its dignity, innocence, and sensitivity. And in the end, the world defeats us. Yet we are masters and mistresses of engineering denials, counterfeit sensitivities, and spiritualities in the face of the relentless, turbulent tide that carries us all away. And pastors can be among the most effective deniers, charlatans, and fakers.

Unless the pastor is blunted by denials, biases, or illusions, taking clear stock of human nature means looking beyond and through the pieties, manners, and customs with which we cloth ourselves, to the tangled, conflicted, frightened, willful selves beneath. This is what my dad was attempting to show me in sharing his insights. And it is a main theme in what I have written here.

The pastor learns to respond to the willful, insecure sheep in his\her care by looking beneath the surface by which they seek the acceptance of the world and, all too often, seek to make the church and the pastor over in their own image. The pastor’s job is to know and understand, not to make superficial judgements. The law we take out of the Biblical toolbox will judge. We are to be “meek as lambs and wise as foxes.” The pastor looks unflinchingly at the subtleties of the human heart and sees more than the decorated sentiments and the pale offerings of what others want to be true. We should also not be deceived by the self-righteous pieties which claim to resist those things to

which people gladly, if secretly, give themselves. There is no righteousness of our own to be had in either case. As pastors of the Church our calling is to speak God's truth, "to call a thing what it is."

As pastors we proclaim the Gospel, the promise of God's abiding faithfulness, presence, and redemptive work in Jesus *for us*, even as we walk with our people in the complexities of a troubled, over-busy life. We stand with the willful, wandering sheep beneath the withering storms of adversity and those sun drenched moments when the clouds break, and life is good. We "weep with those who weep" and "rejoice with those who rejoice". Together we learn to rely in faith on our Good Shepherd, to hear and trust the voice of the One who leads us in hope with a deliberate grace.

It is that deliberate grace that gently yet firmly and faithfully energizes the ministry of the Word. We proclaim that Word, Christ crucified. A stumbling block to every ill-conceived project of pseudo-salvation. We proclaim Jesus Christ Crucified in the cleansing water of baptism, the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, the glorious, freeing word of forgiveness. Although at times this Word will be barely audible and scarcely believable through the world's din of distractions and crashing alarms we proclaim it nonetheless. We bring that Word as we sit at the bedside of a woman living out her last months in a nursing home on some nameless side street, neglected or forgotten by her family and the 'progressing' world. To people who speak of tomorrow so hopefully and confidently yet too often waste and squander it when comes, we proclaim that Word that brings a real future. For that Word, and that Word alone, is "the power of God unto salvation." Through that Word "the light shines in the darkness" seeks and finds us in the shadows. Through that Word the bell of freedom and hope rings!

No matter how hard or sincere their efforts, the people in our care will never be free from the power, the restraints and tragedies of a mortal life that hold them back from arriving at the world's promised fulfillments to which they have given themselves. And yet, for all its troubles, torments, losses, and unfilled longings, life can be carried along on a light breeze under the promising skies of a living faith. And this is where the real joy and delight of ministry is to be found. For the pastoral calling is fishing for men and women not with games, tricks, or allurements. We cast the freeing, empowering, promising Gospel into the world's absurdity and madness. We go into battle with the Word of God, believing that the very Living God is in that Word. We proclaim Christ crucified into the bound, fractured, wandering, and turbulent lives of the beloved baptized with whom we struggle and rejoice in the fellowship of sin and grace.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

During his 46 years in the parish ministry, Mark Anderson served both rural and urban congregations in Minnesota, Montana, and California. He also served for a time as an Air National Guard chaplain, with tours at Buckley Air Force Base, Denver, Colorado, and March Air Force Base, Riverside, California. He is an avid blues guitarist, bass player, and woodworker.

In retirement, Mark is engaged in an online ministry in partnership with the 1521Foundation LLC, Corona del Mar, California, and Luther House of Study, Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You are invited to learn more about Mark's work and these organizations at:  
[www.pastormarkanderson.org](http://www.pastormarkanderson.org).

Mark and his wife Linda (his constant support, advocate, best friend, and by far the better half!) reside in Coto de Caza, California. They have enjoyed many travel adventures together with a definite preference for Italy! They have three children, Erik, Kristin, and Geoff (married to the adorable Jenn).

