



The Pastoral Calling from the Perspective of a Bishop

HERBERT W. CHILSTROM

Bishop, Minnesota Synod
Lutheran Church in America
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The editors ask that I reflect on the theological and biblical bases for the pastoral vocation. I am to aim at such questions as: “What constitutes the pastoral calling? Why such lack of joy and courage among pastors? Why so little clarity on what they are to be doing?”

A tough assignment indeed!

Had I been asked to write this article five years ago it would have been much easier. When I took office as bishop I had a very clear and, if I may say so, opinionated idea of what constituted the pastoral calling. But that view was based almost exclusively on my own personal experience and attitude—an experience which had never been tested by *not* having a call, and an attitude which assumed that I could always do something else if I tired of ordained ministry. In short, I had a *superficially functional* understanding of ordained ministry. Having now counseled with hundreds of pastors, male and female, and out of many different sets of circumstances, and having reflected more carefully on the nature of ordained ministry, I have come to see more depth and substance for the pastoral calling.

First, a word about the phrase, “the pastoral calling.” Although some might call it hair-splitting, I am among those who resist the general theme of this issue of *Word & World*—“the Pastoral Vocation.” There is only one vocation—the one into which all of us were baptized. The spiritual priesthood or vocation belongs to every Christian. Through baptism and faith all are called to be witnesses and bearers of the Good News. There are many facets, of course, to the idea of the universal priesthood. But at least one of them is that in our baptism we were “ordained” into a life of witness and service, regardless of the particular calling or occupation we may eventually pursue. In fact, a baptized believer with no occupation at all still holds intact his or her vocation as a priest among priests.

But what then constitutes the *pastoral calling*?

THE IRRESISTIBLE CALL

We can begin with what one might call “the irresistible call to preach the Gospel.” The term “irresistible” is chosen deliberately because it underscores the fact that

the call to the pastoral office does not originate in us any more than does our call in baptism to be a Christian. It is a call from without, a call that comes uninvited, a call that forces itself upon us. It is not of course irresistible to the extent that we cannot turn aside from it (for God grants us

freedom to do so). But it is a call which persists from the God whose Spirit not only creates faith in every believer, but also calls certain persons to the ministry of Word and sacrament.

In addressing this deeply personal aspect of the call, Halford Luccock writes about “the terrifying truth that the ministry is distinguished from every other profession by the fact that it must be an incarnation. The minister must not only *do*; he must *be*.”¹ But the ultimate source of the message, says Luccock, is not within the minister. “It is *not* giving all that is in us; it is giving that which is not in us at all. It is the preacher’s presenting himself and all that he is as a channel for something that is *not* in him, the grace of God.”²

In the deepest sense there is no difference between the clergy and other Christians. Both stand under judgment and grace. But this does not mean that there is no difference in calling. The office of the ministry stands as distinct and essential to the life of the church. And when we look for qualified persons to fill that office we look for those who have, more than anything else, this irresistible call to preach the gospel.

This is the pattern that seems normative in the Scriptures:

—With startling abruptness the word comes to Abraham, “Go from your country” (Gen. 12:1).

—Before he makes excuse, God says to Moses, “Come, I will send you to Pharaoh...” (Ex. 3:10), and after hearing his excuses God still persists and promises, “I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak” (Ex. 4:12).

—Although there is no record of reluctance on his part, the call to Joshua is clearly from without and essential to his mission: “Be strong and of good courage...the Lord your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9).

—The call, “Samuel! Samuel!” comes first; then the response, “Your servant hears” (1 Sam. 3:10).

—Saul and David are the least likely to be called. One hides among the baggage; the other is the almost-forgotten youngest son tending sheep.

—Isaiah must be overpowered by a vision and assured of forgiveness before he can reply, “Here am I! Send me” (Isa. 6:8).

—Jeremiah protests that he does not have the gift of eloquence and, besides, is too young to command the respect of his audience. But God claims to have had him in mind before birth and touches his mouth with the certainty that “I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:9).

—In spite of his disclaimers, Amos clearly has the irresistible call: “The Lord took me from following the flock,...‘Go, prophesy to my people’” (Amos 7:14-15).

—None of the twelve offered himself for discipleship.

—Paul is forcibly turned about and directed to “enter the city,” and he is promised, “You will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:6).

—Finally, is it stretching the point too far to say that even our Lord had an irresistible call to proclaim the Kingdom? And is it not most evident at the

¹Halford E. Luccock, *In the Minister’s Workshop* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1944) 18.

²*Ibid.*, 11.

beginning of his ministry in the wilderness and at the end of his ministry in Gethsemane as he wrestles with his call to the cross?

It could be argued that not all of those mentioned above were called to “preach the gospel.” The problem, however, may be in our understanding of the role, not in God’s call. As we continue to affirm today, the exact mode and specific function of the pastoral office may vary from time to time and from place to place. The essential elements, however, remain constant: God takes the initiative; he calls specific persons to fill the office; he sets them apart for a particular purpose; he gives them the gifts needed to fulfil that purpose; the purpose always relates, in some way, to the gospel.

This “irresistible call” to the pastoral office came home to me in a forceful and dramatic way only shortly after I had determined that God was calling me to the ordained ministry. Scores of young men were gathered one evening in a Minneapolis church for a banquet. All were candidates for the seminary. Other elements of the program have long since faded from my memory, but not the brief and spontaneous greeting from the sometimes blunt and acerbic Oscar Benson, then president of the Augustana Lutheran Church: “If you can possibly stay out of the ministry, stay out!”

His words were both disturbing and reassuring—disturbing for those who thought, at a time of clergy shortage, that they were doing the church a favor by becoming pastors; but reassuring for those of us who had resisted the call and had only yielded to it with reluctance.

For ten years I have been a member of our synod’s Examining Committee, trying to ascertain the fitness for ministry of those seeking ordination. If there is a single criticism I would level against our process over these years it would be our failure to pursue more rigorously with each candidate the question: “Do you have an irresistible call to preach the gospel?”

In a sermon on “Preaching in the 1980s” Archbishop Donald Coggan speaks about the link between the called prophets of God from one generation to the next:

Assume [the preacher] is the last link in that chain which goes back long before the 8th century prophets, that chain of men amazed that they of all people should have been called, diffident in the extreme, very often, tortured sometimes when the word within them seemed like a burning fire, but able nonetheless to say “The word of the Lord came to me.” This is the prophetic succession from Abraham to Bonhoeffer, from Jeremiah to Oscar Romero.³

Without buying into the Anglican idea of apostolic succession, can we not still affirm that those of us who believe we are called to proclaim the gospel feel a deep sense of identity with the prophets, apostles, and pastors who have gone before us?

JOY IN THE CALL

At this juncture we can ask the question, “Why is there such a lack of joy and courage among our pastors?” It may be that the question should be fine-tuned:

³Donald Coggan, “Preaching in the 1980’s,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 3 (1980) 14.

“Why is there such a lack of joy and courage among *some* pastors?” There is indeed a dearth of enthusiasm for their calling with *some* pastors. But it is by no means universal. As a bishop I spend much of my time dealing with problem situations, often involving pastors whose ministry has become joyless and burdensome. But I also have the high privilege of working with the vast majority of our pastors who find great satisfaction in living out their call to ordained ministry.

Where is the source of joy and courage? For some it may be in their presumed “success” in ministry, measured by increase in membership, larger budgets, affirmations of preaching skills, or what have you. And, indeed, clergy are human and need external signs of encouragement.

But the ultimate and fundamental source of joy and courage remains constant throughout one’s ministry. It is to be found in the irresistible call from God. Just as one may have said at the beginning, so one continues to say throughout one’s time of ministry, “I cannot do otherwise than preach and live the gospel as an ordained minister.”

Is there not a parallel in our baptism? We affirm the need for daily renewal of our new birth. The act of baptism is complete in and of itself. And the effect of baptism—its mark, if you will—remains with us throughout life. Yet baptism cannot be fully appreciated unless it is renewed by a daily repentance and faith response.

Without making ordination into a sacrament, is it not possible to say that the same kind of renewal which is needed for our covenant of baptism also keeps joy and courage alive in the life of a pastor? We do not practice re-ordination in the Lutheran Church precisely for the same reason we do not practice re-baptism. We recognize both actions as rooted in the gospel. That is to say, both are initiated by God. That being the case, a pastor looks to the *Source* of his or her calling to find the source for joy and courage.

HOW FUNCTIONAL ARE WE?

I suggested earlier that I am no longer a pure “functionalist” in the matter of ordination. That is to say, I now see ordination as something *more* than a rite by which one is allowed to function in a certain way in the church, and as something *less* than a sacrament. As such, I find myself on middle ground among Lutherans. On one side of me are those who see the ordained person as one who is chosen by the community to lead for the sake of good order. On the other side are those who consider pastors the successors of Peter, Paul and the other apostles.

As they review recent Lutheran/Roman Catholic dialogues, Glenn Stone and Charles LaFontaine point out that a theology of ordained ministry has never been worked out precisely in the Lutheran Church. One can find a variety of views within a simple branch of Lutheranism. But, as they have also pointed out, there are certain basic convictions which come to the surface regardless of which view of ordination one tends to favor. Among the most basic is the contention that “the pastorate is the only indispensable order in Church life. The pastor is needed, for example, to preside at the Eucharist. The pastor acts in the place of Christ, to speak the word, to pronounce absolution and to administer the sacraments.”⁴

⁴Glenn C. Stone & Charles LaFontaine, *Exploring the Faith We Share* (New York: Paulist, 1980) 78.

If this is true, then we need to take with utmost seriousness the act of ordination. In ordination we acknowledge the irresistible call of God and the faith commitment of the one ordained. This is no mere matter of joining a service club, promising to uphold its ideals. Quite to the contrary, ordination is the acknowledgement that this person, like Amos and Jeremiah, Peter and Paul, is now set apart to represent Christ as he or she preaches the word, pronounces absolution, administers the sacraments, etc.

It is fair to ask how one can survive the ordained ministry—to say nothing about finding joy and courage—unless one is absolutely convinced that one has been set apart for this purpose. The biblical characters mentioned earlier serve as good examples. And we can add to their list all those persons, like Luther himself, who found it impossible to *function* as prophet and priest without the bedrock confidence that God had called them to the proclaiming office.

I wonder at times whether the root of our problem of identity in the ordained ministry today cannot be traced to the trends of the last two decades. The accent was on the pastor as enabler and counselor rather than preacher, teacher and liturgical leader. This was further complicated by our attempts to broaden our definition of ordained ministry to include more who wanted to enter organizations tangentially related to the pastoral calling. In the end we lost something of our sense of being and direction.

In the midst of that confusion Seward Hiltner gave us a book which set us on a better course. After urging the clergy to stop apologizing for their calling, he reminded them that they are indeed successors to those who were set apart in New Testament times. Hiltner strikes a wholesome balance: “[the pastor] is not to be a king giving orders without consultation, nor a hired man performing only such functions as the community votes. But he is local ‘bishop,’ overseer, supervisor, or facilitator of the total work of the total community.”⁵ The problem with most pastors, says Hiltner, is that they settle for too little power. They become captive to the whims of the congregations and succumb to the “just doing my job” syndrome. The local church needs a pastor “who, while dependent upon his community, is nevertheless free at critical points to transcend it. He must be with his congregation, but he cannot be merely an organization man.”⁶

THE SOMA CONNECTION

Let us now shift our focus—some would say quite radically—to look at another reason for lack of joy and courage among ordained ministers. I have in mind the care of the body. I’m convinced, on the basis of both my own experience, as well as that of pastors with whom I counsel, that many pastors are so neglectful of the care of their bodies that they cannot possibly fulfil the demands of their calling. Andrew Blackwood was a respected counselor to several generations of clergypersons. In one of his books he begins a chapter on “Bodily Discipline” with the unabashed statement: “The spiritual growth of a minister depends largely on what he does with his body.”⁷ He goes on to say that in our preaching we treat our hearers as though they are disembodied spirits, and in our personal habits

⁵Seward Hiltner, *Ferment In the Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969) 36.

⁶*Ibid.*, 48.

⁷Andrew Blackwood, *The Growing Minister* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960) 83.

we treat our own bodies as though they have no connection with our mind or spirit.

It seems that God our Creator is more successful at times in getting his message through to us by means of secular sources. (God's right hand?) For example, a major corporation in an Upper-Midwest area recently announced an ambitious program aimed at the physical fitness and well-being of its employees. The head of the company makes no bones about the fact that his motivation is two-fold: he genuinely cares about his employees; and he believes physically fit employees make for a more productive and prosperous company. The program centers on five simple requirements:

1. If you smoke, quit.
2. If you use alcohol at all, let it be with strict moderation.
3. Begin some regular regimen of physical exercise. A minimum of fifteen minutes a day for at least five days each week is required.
4. Keep within ten pounds of your "ideal" weight. It is recognized that "ideal" weight may vary from one person to another depending on many circumstances. But most people know their "ideal" weight.
5. Get an average of seven hours of sleep daily.

As I was reading about the program I asked myself why we have such a hard time speaking as forthrightly in the Lutheran Church. We give nodding assent to the notion that the body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19) and that we are to dedicate it "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom. 12:1). But we hardly dare mention any form of bodily discipline for fear that it will somehow dilute the message of justification and lead us back to those dismal days when some Lutherans lived under the heavy burden of unhealthy legalism.

But isn't it time we pastors set things into a proper balance by preaching *and living* a complete gospel—a gospel that reaches the whole person? Bonhoeffer's message about cheap grace still hasn't come through to many of us. "To be Lutheran," he once said, "must mean to leave the following of Christ to legalists, Calvinists and enthusiasts—and all this for the sake of grace."⁸ We have tried to vindicate our heritage, says Bonhoeffer, by making grace available on the cheapest terms. In the process we may have killed the life of following Christ. To be sure, Bonhoeffer had in mind far more than a program of physical discipline. But is not the care of the Spirit's temple at least a part—and a significant part—of the "cost of discipleship"?

Having been raised in a home that was not particularly legalistic, I can understand why some pastors bristle when certain habits are labeled "unchristian." It never occurred to me that my father's smoking or an occasional glass of wine had anything to do with being a Christian. And we would agree, of course, that those kind of ideas miss the point entirely. This is a discussion within the family of those who are already Christian. It is not a matter of being Christian or "unchristian." It is a matter of wholeness and well-being *as a Christian*.

⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 17.

Just recently I sat across the table from a man who had to retire early because of a second heart attack. He described how the doctor came into the emergency room and asked, "Harry, are

you still smoking in spite of my warnings?” “Yes.” “Then I’ll make it real simple for you this time. If you want to die soon, keep on smoking. If you want to live, quit right now.”

How can we pastors go to the pulpit and preach a stewardship of all of life if we rob ourselves and our families of added years of life, love and service?

Yes, I too get irritated if a prickly legalist chides me over an occasional glass of wine or beer. But after the irritation passes I recognize that a Christian has but two choices, strict moderation or abstinence. And in spite of the fact that I may not be an abstainer myself, I have come more and more to the conclusion that abstinence needs to be encouraged and defended in a society that assumes that there is no such option.

As for exercise and weight control, a quick glance around any gathering of clergypersons shows that most of the temples of the Spirit are out of shape and badly in need of repair. Fortunately the medical profession is moving away from the strict height/weight charts that plagued us for so long. It is being suggested that most people have in mind their own “ideal” weight and can maintain it without drastic measures. And we seem to be moving toward a more inclusive attitude toward exercise, including a reaffirmation of the old-fashioned pleasures of walking and climbing stairs.

Since this article is not aimed at a detailed prescription for physical well-being, no more need be said. What does need saying again, however, is that the pastor’s body is not disconnected from his or her soul. If there is a general lack of joy and courage among our pastors, it is not far-fetched to suggest that it may be due, at least in part, to neglect of the body.

The mention of E. Stanley Jones conjures up in most minds the visage of a man with uncommon energy who kept a vigorous pace well into his 80s. What many do not know is that Jones did not learn how to respect his body until his early 40s. Until then he had periodic bouts with physical exhaustion. It was in mid-life that he dedicated his body to a new way of living, learned to respect his body’s need for rest and regular exercise, and in the process discovered new resources of energy that allowed him to accomplish even more than he had been able to do in his younger years. Martin Luther was aiming at the same idea when he said to his gaunt and studious friend Melancthon that we serve God also by taking rest and holiday!

THE FULLNESS OF LIFE

Phillips Brooks urged his theological students to “pray for and work for fullness of life,...full red blood in the body; full honesty and truth in the mind; and the fullness of a grateful love for the Saviour in your heart.”⁹ We can ask for no more. In a calling that makes demands on us which drain mind, spirit, and body almost daily, we need both an irresistible sense of call and a wholesome sense of physical well-being to give us joy and courage.

⁹Quoted from Arthur S. Hoyt, *The Pulpit and American Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1921) 42.