



What About . . .

Pastors

Why does God give us pastors?

When we look at our lives and measure them according to the holiness and righteousness of the Lord God Almighty we are moved to say, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” We receive forgiveness of sins, and become righteous before God, by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ lived, suffered, died and rose again for us, and that for His sake our sins are forgiven, and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.

But how do we receive this faith? In order to obtain such faith, God instituted the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments. It is through the Word and Sacraments that the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases Him, in those who hear the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

Pastors accompany us on our earthly pilgrimage. They serve us with Christ’s Word and Sacraments, through which the Holy Spirit gives us forgiveness, life and salvation. Therefore, we believe, teach and confess that “when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command . . . this is just as valid and certain, even in heaven, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself” (Small Catechism).

How does God give us pastors?

The pastoral office is a gift that God has given to the church, as Paul says, “When he ascended on high he gave gifts to men” (Eph. 4:8, 11-12). Paul enumerates pastors and teachers among the gifts belonging to the church, and he adds that they are given for the work of ministry and for building up the body of Christ. Therefore, the right of electing and ordaining ministers is a duty and responsibility of the church.

Through a congregation’s call, God places a man to be the shepherd of that congregation. “Our churches teach that nobody shall publicly preach or teach or administer the sacraments without a regular call” (Augsburg Confession, Article XIV). Only those who are called and ordained to the pastoral office may exercise it publicly. Although the Holy Scriptures make it clear that all the baptized are priests, called to offer God sacrifices of thanks and praise (1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10), it also teaches that in the church there is an office to teach, feed, guide and rule, which Christians, by virtue of their general calling as Christians, do not possess (1 Cor. 12:29;

Rom. 10:15; 1 Tim. 5:17; James 3:1). While all Christians through Baptism are made part of God’s royal priesthood, not all Christians are ministers.

When a man receives and accepts his first call to serve as a pastor, he is then ordained. Ordination is a confirmation of a man’s call into the ministry of the church and is the historic and apostolic rite by which, through Word and prayer, a man is set apart for service to Christ and His church as a pastor. During his ordination, he is also installed into the pastoral office of the congregation that calls him. In the future, if he accepts other calls to serve, he will be installed, but not ordained again.

How are pastors described?

The word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” Shepherding is a predominant picture in the Bible for both the work of Christ and the work of our pastors (cf. Ps. 23; Ezek. 34; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2-3). The Scriptures indicate that the Holy Spirit appoints men to shepherd God’s people (Acts 20:28).

Pastors are also referred to frequently in the Bible as “ministers,” a word that literally means “slave” (Acts 26:16; Rom. 15:16; Eph. 3:7; 1 Tim. 4:6). In 2 Cor. 4:5 Paul describes pastors this way: “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your slaves, for Jesus’ sake.” Pastors model their ministry on the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ who did not come to be served, but to serve. The pastoral office is an office of loving, caring service to the people of God, in the stead and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“Oversight” is another less frequently used term that describes the pastor’s work. Pastoral oversight is the spiritual duty of rebuking and warning Christ’s people when they fall into sin, feeding and caring for them with the Gospel, and guarding and defending them from false teachers and their false teachings. Pastoral oversight is not to be confused with institutional management or leadership, like a CEO type of position.

Our Lutheran Confessions refer to the pastoral office as the “Preaching Office,” to which men are called and ordained. We also speak of the office of the holy ministry. The ministry is holy not because of the men who are in it, but because of the One who established it. It is holy because of what the Lord is doing for His people through the work of His pastors.

What about Pastors?

What does God expect of pastors?

Pastors do not “represent their own persons but the person of Christ, because of the Church’s call, as Christ testifies (Luke 10:16) ‘He who hears you, hears me.’ When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they do so in Christ’s place and stead” (Apology VII/VIII.28).

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Tim. 3:2-4 that a pastor is to be “above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.” In 1 Tim. 3:6 we read that a pastor is not to be “a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.” In Titus 1:9 is it is said that pastors “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine, and refute it.”

Although some Protestant churches ordain women to the pastoral office, this is a 20th-century innovation. For more than 1,900 years, there has been nearly unanimous faithfulness to the Word of God, given through the Apostle Paul, that women are not to serve as pastors (see 1 Cor. 14:33-35, 37; 1 Tim. 2:11-12; 1 Tim. 3:1-2 and Titus 1:5-6).

Because it is God who places men into the pastoral office, through the congregation, only God, through the congregation, can properly remove a man from the pastoral office. Pastors are forgiven sinners, as are all baptized children of God. Thus, we do not expect perfection of our pastors, any more than pastors would expect congregations to be perfect. The awesome forgiveness of Jesus Christ sustains us all. A “hire and fire” attitude toward our pastors must not enter into our thinking. Removing a man from the pastoral office must be based only on clear, Biblical, criteria; namely, persistent adherence to false doctrine, a scandalous life, or willful neglect of duty.

What are the duties and commitments of pastors?

Our pastors preach, catechize, administer the Sacraments, hear confession from penitent sinners, and comfort the sick. The church knows that even the most faithful pastor can never do enough of these things, but the church also knows these are the precious duties our pastors are given to do. We must never allow other things to take priority over these key pastoral duties and activities.

With the help of God, our pastors have the responsibility to speak the truth in love, but this duty must be understood correctly.

Our pastors are not “people pleasers,” watering down the truths of God’s Word. Pastors pledge themselves uncondition-

ally, and without qualification, to the Lutheran Confessions as contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, as a true and faithful exposition of the Word of God.

This strong doctrinal commitment safeguards the teaching of the truth of the Word of God in the congregation. Also, it protects the pastor from unjust criticism when he stands up for the truths of God’s Word. By means of this strong doctrinal foundation, both pastor and people are able to evaluate their relationship to one another and the work of the congregation.

How do we support our pastors?

The most important way we support our pastors is through our prayers, asking the Lord of the Church to give our pastors wisdom, strength, courage and peace, asking Him to bless our pastors’ ministry among us and to work powerfully through their proclamation of the Word and administration of the Sacraments. Our children should be taught each night to remember their pastor in their prayers.

The members of our congregations assist their pastor as they encourage and support him in the ministry entrusted to him. They volunteer their time, by serving in a variety of ways in the parish, and give of their treasures. The pastor is not a “hired hand,” who is to do all the work of the congregation. Telling the good news of the forgiveness of sins in Jesus, in many different situations and opportunities in life, is a task and duty given to all Christians, not only pastors (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 Peter 3:15).

God’s Word also has these things to say about how we are to support our pastors. 1 Cor. 9:14: “The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” Gal. 6:6-7: “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” 1 Thess. 5:12-13: “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.” Heb. 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

What a blessing pastors have been to God’s people down through the ages! May God continue to bless the church mightily through His gift of pastors.

— Dr. A. L. Barry
President

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod