

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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Who Is the “Perfect” Pastor?”



By Rev. Dr. Dean O. Wenthe

Concordia Theological Seminary continues to receive God’s gracious gifts: His Gospel brings larger classes to our campus; His Word and Sacrament sustain us; His church supports our calling to form caring and compassionate Lutheran pastors.

This issue of *For the Life of the World* describes how the church—born in, defined by, and nurtured in God’s Holy Word and Sacraments—can sustain family life and be Christ’s healing presence in the world.

These unsettled days in our culture are rich in opportunities for the Gospel of our Crucified Lord to shine with fresh and compelling brightness as the

darkness of self-absorption fragments families and destroys community.

How can our students become “perfect” pastors? The Scriptures and our Lutheran Confessions have rightly resisted portraying the pastoral office as “above” the laity or possessing a special grace. Rather, the pastor is called by the congregation to be a shepherd who will preach, teach, and speak the Word of God faithfully; administer the Sacraments in accord with Christ’s institution; care for each and every sheep; and reach out to the lost with the Good News. Like the Good Shepherd—Jesus Christ—he is called to give his life for the sheep—in the pulpit, before the altar, at the font—and also in living rooms, at bedsides, and before the world.

Our students are formed to be shepherds who understand themselves and their calling in Scriptural and confessional categories. They are taught that the sole lens that offers a clear reading of human need and of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ is that ground by the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.



To be such a pastor is not to be “perfect” in some abstract set of attributes; it is to be “faithful” as a shepherd. Such a faithful pastor embodies, like a shepherd, a rich mixture of abilities. A recent description of the multiple dimensions of faithful, insightful pastoral care is helpful.

The unique confluence of forces and influences impinging on people who engage deeply and well in the ministry shapes them so powerfully, I suspect, that they become people of peculiar virtues, sensitivities, and skills that are in large measure distinctive to really good pastors. The constant interplay of attention to Scripture; sorting through the Gospel’s call and demand on them and their congregations in their particular context; leading worship, preaching, and teaching; responding to requests for help of all kinds from myriad people in need; living with children, youth, and adults through whole life-cycles marked both by great joy and profound mourning; sustaining unending responsibility for running a small (or sometimes fairly large) non-profit organization with its buildings, budgets, public relations, and personnel issues—the unique confluence of all that both requires and gives shape to a distinctive imagination unlike that in any other walk of life. (Craig Dykstra, “The Pastoral Imagination,” *Initiatives in Religion*, Spring 2001, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 2)

The manner in which a pastor loves and serves his people; the way in which laity support and provide for the pastor; the goodness of family life where fidelity and love are clear; the excellence in the way Christians perform their various jobs in the marketplace; the compassion and care that mark the church’s evangelistic and mission efforts: all provide a wonderful invitation to our fragmented society and fractured families that there is a place where love is real and true.



This contemporary description echoes a classic portrayal of pastoral care by John Watson.

One’s heart goes back from this eager, restless, ambitious age to the former days, and recalls with fond recollection the pastor of his youth, who had lived all his ministry in one place, and was buried where he was ordained—who had baptized a child, and admitted her to the sacrament, and married her and baptized her children—who knew all the ins and outs of his people’s character, and carried family history for generations in his head—who was ever thinking of his people, watching over them, visiting their homes, till his familiar figure on the street linked together the past and the present, and heaven and earth, and opened a treasure house of sacred memories. He prayed with a lad before he went away—his mother could almost repeat the words; he was constantly inquiring about his welfare, so binding him to his faith and home by silken ties; he was in the house on the day of his return, to see how it had fared with him in the outer world. People turned to him as by an instinct in their joys and sorrows; men consulted him in the

crises of life, and, as they lay a-dying, committed their wives and children to his care. He was a head to every widow, and a father to the orphans, and the friend of all lowly, discouraged, unsuccessful souls. Ten miles away people did not know his name, but his own congregation regarded no other, and in the Lord’s presence it was well known, it was often mentioned; when he laid down his trust, and arrived on the other side, many whom he had fed and guided, and restored and comforted, till he saw them through the gates, were waiting to receive their shepherd-minister, and as they stood around him before the Lord, he, of all men, could say without shame, “Behold, Lord, thine under-shepherd, and the flock thou didst give me.”

The “perfect” pastor has flaws and faults like each of his members, but he is daily renewed by Christ’s mercy and called to faithful and loving care. What a noble calling to enter. A good shepherd is imaginative as well as reliable. At Concordia Theological Seminary, our students are formed to be shepherds who understand themselves and their calling in Scriptural and confessional categories. They are taught that the sole lens that offers a clear reading of human need and of God’s redemptive purpose in Christ is that ground by the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.

What does that lens reveal? How is the “faithful pastor” to shepherd Christ’s flock? Specifically, how is he to shepherd his sheep, members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod? In a word, he is formed to love his sheep and their church.

The greatest treasure of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is God’s gracious gift of His Son Jesus Christ, who comes to us through His Holy Word and Sacraments. Sacred Scripture, Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper offer Christ crucified as the Savior for fallen humanity. Through these means of grace, Christ forgives our sins, gives us His life, and saves us from our enemies. Luther’s great Gospel themes of “by grace alone,” “by faith alone,” “for the sake of Christ alone” are precisely Scripture’s teaching. The identity and health of the church are based on these Scriptural foundations with Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

In a culture that increasingly lacks any satisfying account of life and its meaning, our church is uniquely positioned to announce and to speak the truthful, beautiful, wholesome, and life-giving story of Jesus. Instead of human life being reduced to a moment of purchase, a moment of pleasure, or a moment of power, the story of Jesus reveals the created and blood-bought value of each and every person.

Our wonderful calling is to form our life in that story—to recall our baptism, to hear the Lord’s absolution, to speak His prayer, to reflect on His truthful Word, to receive His very body and blood at His table.

Such a calling and life, under God’s grace, display the abundant life that Christ gives (John 10:10b). In a period when the culture of death ends life in the womb and seeks to eliminate the elderly who require care, there is an enormous opportunity for the church to hold high God’s gift

of life. The Christian man and woman who welcome and love their children, who care for their parents, and who remain faithful to each other are living witnesses to a better, richer, and fuller life.

If one looks at unsettled periods in human history—the fall of Rome, the Reformation—these periods can provide a context for the church’s confession of Christ to shine with compelling brilliance. From Littleton, Colorado, to Washington, D.C., it is evident that our time is marked by a foundational loss of purpose and meaning.

What an opportunity for every lay person in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod to speak out, to confess the sanctity of the unborn and the elderly, the sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of service to God and neighbor. The hunger for something good, beautiful, holy, and eternal is clearly all around us.

Sacred Scripture, the Creeds, and the Lutheran Confessions offer the good, beautiful, holy, and eternal in their description of the living Triune God. Every man, woman, and child in Christ’s church have an opportunity to bring the Gospel to empty souls. Small congregations, large congregations; neighborhood churches, rural churches, community churches; committees and conventions: all are called to speak the wholesome and truthful and life-giving story of Jesus.

Under God’s grace, it is crucial that the church speak that story with great *authenticity, integrity, clarity, and charity*.

The story must be spoken with *authenticity*. To combine it with other stories that seek to explain life’s meaning is to embrace false and fatal words. Israel sought to combine its confession of the true God with Baal’s story. The end of such an effort was tragic: the people perished. The church is called to *authenticity* in its speaking. It is to speak the Scripture’s story of Jesus and to confess the Scripture’s Gospel. Other tales of “good news” cannot refresh and restore the soul. Instead, they lead to a fragmented life on earth and separation from God in eternity. The Holy Spirit’s power to revive and to renew attends only the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.

The church is also called to display great *integrity*. Our confession and our practice are to reach out with evangelistic wholeness. Non-Christians will behold how our lives are ordered by the Gospel. Our creeds and confessions will be seen as living expressions of our very lives rather than as mere relics of ancient tradition.

The church is also called to display great *clarity*. Rather than repeating formulas in a wooden fashion, laity and pastors are called to be both faithful and fresh in their witness to Christ. Our best minds should critically assess what is forming the assumptions of the people whom we meet each day. Whether it be individualism, consumerism, post-modernism or similar forces, the church is called to name and to identify those forces that destroy the spirit and empty the soul of human beings. The capacity to reflect faithfully and critically is the first and fundamental task in sharing the Gospel.

All of this is to be done with manifest and evident *charity*. The manner in which a pastor loves and serves his people; the way in which laity support and provide for the pastor; the goodness of family life where fidelity and love are clear; the excellence in the way Christians per-

form their various jobs in the marketplace; the compassion and care that mark the church’s evangelistic and mission efforts: all provide a wonderful invitation to our fragmented society and fractured families that there is a place where love is real and true. It is in Christ’s church. Font, pulpit, and altar provide the means for such true and real love.

Authenticity. Integrity. Clarity. Charity. More than money, more than technique, more than public relations, more than organizational adjustment: these are the qualities that will carry the church into a bright future with the promise of God’s presence and blessing. And, of course, these are God’s gifts formed in us by His grace rather than by any good capacity within us.

God uses His Holy Word and Sacraments to bestow *authenticity, integrity, clarity, and charity* upon the church and each of its members. So, our treasure is in God’s central and foundational gifts. May our pastors be “perfect” by faithfully shepherding their flocks with such qualities. May we receive our pastors and follow them as we tell the truthful, wholesome, and life-giving story of Jesus to all the world. As we do so, the church’s poets have taught us to pray for the church and for missions:

For the church:

*Preserve, O Lord, Thy children,
Thine own blest heritage;
Resist, disperse, and scatter
Those who against Thee rage.
Let Thy commandments guide us,
Grant us Thy heavenly food;
Clothe us in Thy rich garments,
Bought with Thy precious blood.* (The Lutheran Hymnal, 264, Stanza 4)

For missions:

*And not alone to nations
In faraway retreats,
But everywhere I broadcast
His love through crowded streets:
The lives that my life touches,
However great or small—
Let them through me see Jesus,
Who served and saved us all.* (Lutheran Worship, 320, Stanza 4)

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