

# Theological Foundations of the Office of the Minister of Christian Education

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This meeting is, I believe, something of a first in our Synod. That is not to say that this is the first time our Synod has had trained workers who were waiting to be called into our congregations. Some of you may have been among those who had to wait for a call in the thirties; others will remember or at least have heard of those days. There was a time when we thought it could never happen again. We never thought that a meeting such as this one would ever be called. This present meeting is to consider whether there are unmet needs in our congregations which unassigned candidates might be called to fill. More specifically, the position of Director or Minister of Christian Education is to be explored as a form of the public ministry in our midst.

This paper is to examine Theological Foundations for such a position. To inquire into theological foundations is to ask: what does God in his Word say about establishing new or different forms of the public ministry? Are there guidelines in Scripture for what we are considering? Are there examples for the position of minister of Christian education? What according to Scripture are forms which such a ministry could take? These are the kinds of questions we can pose as we look at theological foundations.

If we are looking for *theological* foundations, we can do no better than to look to him who is the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ. In writing to the Ephesians St. Paul in a prayer directs them to him who is appointed “to be head over all things to the church.” We can adapt his prayer to our use as we today begin our meeting and this study.

We keep praying that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know him better. We pray also that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

With our divinely appointed Head, the living Lord, to inspire, enlighten, and guide us, we can approach this meeting with a confident spirit looking for his will to be done in his church also among us.

In considering “theological foundations” for the office of minister of Christian education we shall let St. Paul show us the way in Ephesians chapter 4, especially verses 7 to 16. In these verses he tells us what the ascended Lord, the Head of the Church, is doing by way of giving workers to his church.

*Ephesians 4:7-16:* But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. 8) This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” 9) (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? 10) He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) 11) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12) to prepare God’s people for works of

service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13) until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

14) Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15) Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16) From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

We do not have the time for a complete, detailed exegesis of this entire section. Let us give consideration to pertinent points as they relate to the subject at hand. We shall look at the Gifts, the Giver, the Giving, and the Goal, that are spoken of by St. Paul. In considering these we draw on other Scripture references. This will enable us to arrive at some applications by way of conclusion.

## 1. The Gifts

You cannot miss it. The apostle is speaking about gifts. He begins by speaking of gifts in verse seven: “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” And we find it again in verse eight in the quotation from Psalm 68: “and [he] gave gifts to men.” What a lavish outpouring of gifts the apostle talks about. Every Christian receives them, a grace measured out to him by Christ, with which to serve and enrich his fellow Christians, the body of Christ. Paul speaks of them in greater detail in Romans 12:6-8.

More pertinent to our discussion are the gifts mentioned in verse 11: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers.” What are the gifts? They are the people who serve as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—the church’s public servants—these are gifts to the church about which Paul writes to the Ephesians.

The people who today serve the church in the public ministry are gifts to the church no less. When we assign a new class of young men at the seminary and of young men and women at Dr. Martin Luther College we refer to these graduates as gifts to the church. To each of them the Lord has given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ, to use the words of Paul in Ephesians chapter four. The gifts may be in the form of natural endowments and of acquired training. The graduates who have received these personal gifts are given to the church to serve in the public ministry.

When Paul speaks of apostles, prophets, etc., does this mean that God has given the church a hierarchy of officers and offices corresponding to the High Priest, priest, and Levite of the Old Testament? The ceremonial law gave a detailed position description for the O.T. hierarchy which the incumbents needed to follow with great care. But Christ came to put an end to the law, to fulfill it. There is no ceremonial law in the New Testament, so that St. Paul is not listing the precise forms of the N.T. ministry, assigning to each form its rank and responsibilities. The list we have in Ephesians is not even complete (cf 1 Cor. 12:28). We are also not able to determine the exact functions of each. In a general way we may say: “apostles” very likely has reference to the Twelve and Paul; the prophets were those who expounded and proclaimed the word; the evangelists carried the gospel message to the heathen, they were the missionaries; the pastors and teachers served established congregations. What, however, all these forms of public service in the church had in common was that they all communicated the gospel to people. They all were a form of the ministry of the Word. This can even be said of the deacons, chosen in Acts six. After the deacons had been installed, we read: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (Acts 6:7). Stephen was stoned to death, not for distributing alms, but for preaching Christ.

It is doubtful that in the church today we have any of the offices mentioned in Ephesians in precisely the form they had in Paul’s day. We have others. Today we can put it this way: It was he who gave some to be parish pastors, some to be Christian day school teachers, some to be world missionaries, some to be mission counselors, some to be executive secretaries, some to be synod and district presidents, some to be professors,

etc. The list of God's gifts to his church is marvelously rich in variety to satisfy a proliferation of needs. There is no reason why we cannot add to this: And he gave some to be ministers of Christian education.

## 2. The Giver

Who is the church's benefactor, granting it such a rich outpouring of diversified gifts? In verse 11 we read. "It is he who gave." The Greek has *καὶ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν*. The *αὐτὸς* refers back to the previous verses. The sense is: the one we have just been talking about, that same one it is who gave. The giver is described in verses 7 to 10. He is Christ, our risen, living Lord, "who ascended higher than, all the heavens, in order to fill the universe." In his prayer in chapter one Paul had referred to him as the one seated at God's right hand, under whose feet God placed all things and whom the Father appointed to be head over everything for the church. Paul reminds his readers that he is the same one who "also descended to the lower, earthly regions." Paul is speaking of the one who is "true God begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man, born of the virgin Mary," the one who while he was in these lower, earthly regions "redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, death, and from the power of the devil," who did that "with his holy precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death." This same one, the God-man, our Redeemer and savior, is the very one who as the exalted Head of the church gives gifts. He gives to each Christian gifts as he sees fit to apportion them, as stated in verses 7 and 8. He gives to the church its public servants, some to be apostles, some to be prophets, etc., as stated in verse 11. With what confidence the church can look to him for this outpouring of gifts! With what gratitude the gifts should be received! With what care the church should put them to use, lest it despise the giver in wasting his bounty!

## 3. The Giving

Gifts are received from a giver when he *gives* them. How does the Lord's giving take place? The Lord gives gifts to individuals in a variety of ways, by heredity, by education, through environment, etc. Somehow whatever we have, whatever we are is the result of God's giving, "dividing to every man severally as he will" (1 Cor 12:11).

How does the Lord give public servants to his church? He gave some to be apostles by choosing them from among his disciples and designating them apostles (Lk 6:13). In the choice of Matthias, also the church became involved in the process (Acts 1:21-26). Paul became an apostle "sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1) but did not enter actively on his world mission work until he was sent out by the congregation at Antioch at the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:3). The congregation in Jerusalem was advised to "choose" (*ἐπισκέψασθε*, look for) men as deacons and then chose (*ἐξελέξαντο*) seven men to this position (Acts 6:3-5). In Crete Titus was to appoint (*καταστήσης*) presbyters in every town (Titus 1:5). On their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas "appointed (*χειροτονήσαντες*) elders for them in each church" (Acts 14:23). Faith comes by hearing and hearing presupposes preaching, but "how can they preach unless they are sent (*ἀποσταλῶσιν*), a word that brings us back to the term "apostle," someone chosen to be sent out. How does the Lord *give* public servants to his church? Somehow he chooses them, designates them for service, in the case of the apostles choosing them directly in person, since that time appointing them indirectly through his church. We are accustomed to refer to this as "calling" people into the public service of the church.

The ascended Lord calls through the church. In doing this he allows his church much freedom as to procedure. We have several examples, describing the manner of election. Acts 1:15-26 describes the choice of a replacement for Judas among the Twelve. Peter names the office to be filled. He lists qualifications for candidates: "one of the men who have been with us the whole time beginning from John's baptism to the time Jesus was taken up from us." The congregation proposes two candidates. They pray that God may "show us which of these two you have chosen." Finally "they drew lots, and the lot fell to Matthias." Because of the

prayer and the drawing of lots. Prof. Meyer considered Matthias' call a direct one from the Lord. Yet the congregation was active in the process.

A similar procedure is described in less detail in Acts chapter six. The Twelve describe the office: "daily distribution of food." The qualifications are listed: "men...who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." Then they chose seven for the position. Nothing more is said about the process of choosing. These two accounts are examples. There is no command to follow their methods. In fact it would be difficult to follow them because the description are not all that precise. Only in regard to qualifications for the bishops, elders, and deacons do we have directives in Paul's pastoral letters. These the church is not to disregard, and yet applying them requires subjective judgment on the part of the calling church. What is of further interest is that Paul enjoins Timothy to train men so that they may be properly "qualified to teach others" (2 Tim 2:2). However, this training concerns itself particularly with the content of the message, "the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses." Nevertheless, being "able to teach" certainly refers to something besides knowing the message, namely, the ability to communicate if effectively.

From all of what precedes we can see the freedom which the Lord grants to his New Testament church in choosing public servants of the word. We, the church, recruit students; maintain a worker training system; set up a curriculum; teach, train, educate and determine what standards are necessary for graduation; assign students to their first call; call them from one congregation to another through orderly procedures. But when all is said and done, what Paul writes is still true that the Head of the church, our living and ascended Lord, is the one who gives some to be pastors, some to be teachers, some to be missionaries, etc. It will also be he who gives some to be ministers of Christian education as the church calls people to such an office. The role God permits the church to have in calling its public servants is considerable, but it takes nothing away from the headship of Christ in apportioning gifts to his church. He remains the giver. That's why a call is divine.

#### 4. The Goal

What does God wish to accomplish through the gifts he gives his church? What are the duties of the public servants? What are the goals, the objectives?

What are God's called servants to do? "To prepare God's people for works of service." Prepare God's people? In what way? The word used for "prepare" is a noun from the verb *καταρτίζω* which means to render fit, sound, complete, then also, to fit out, equip. When we look at the titles of God's servants among the Ephesians—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers—we can only conclude that the preparing, the equipping, is to take place through God's Word, through the teaching and preaching of it. Peter was commissioned to equip God's people when Jesus said to him. "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep." Paul enjoins this on Timothy: "Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season" (2 Tim 4:2). The disciples are commanded to teach their converts to obey everything I have commanded you." God's Word equips and thus must be taught. In some way every called worker has the assignment to communicate God's Word and in this way equip God's people.

With what end in view? Let us consider briefly the picture Paul drew, for us of well-equipped Christians in the body of Christ. They are prepared for "works of service." Service, *διακονία*, is a broad term, from serving people with the gospel to ministering to them with works of love, (charity).

The body of Christ, the church, is to be built up. The people are to reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God. In the beginning of chapter four St. Paul had called on the Ephesians to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace," the unity that is a blessed reality in the *Una Sancta*. When God's called servants faithfully teach and preach his word, this unity is reached as the knowledge of the saints conforms to the revealed Word and the gospel grips the heart. Furthermore, the people are to "become mature," so that they will not be misled by "every wind of teaching." God wants each Christian to be prepared to do his assigned work as a member in the body of Christ. How wonderful to have a congregation as described by St. Paul, a congregation of faithful, mature Christians, knowledgeable, united in

faith, all intent on serving one another with works of service, ever speaking the truth in love, contributing to building up the body of Christ!

We cannot but ask: Is this a description of our congregations? Of the people in our congregations? Even if studies have shown that we have a greater unity of faith and knowledge than most churches, this should not prevent us from asking important questions. Here are a few. How effective is the teaching in our Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools? What are we doing for the post-confirmation youth? Why do we lose so many? Are they being brought to greater Christian maturity? What is happening in our Bible classes? How many people are we reaching? What are we doing to help retirees use their leisure time to reach greater Christian understanding and to render fuller Christian service? How effectively are our people learning to reach out with the Gospel? This becomes a practical question for us at this conference: Can the position of minister of Christian education contribute toward more effectively reaching the goal the apostle holds before us “to prepare God’s people for works of service,” etc.? The answer will depend on the extent to which such a position can improve a congregation’s total educational effort, the extent to which more people are faithfully taught God’s Word. Every effort to that end can look for the Lord’s promised blessings.

### **Some Applications in Summary**

1. The ascended Lord is the living Head of the church who continues to give gifts to his people individually and to his church collectively. When he gives to the church its public servants, he uses the church’s resources to accomplish this. When, however, we do our planning and go about our work and appear to be doing our own thing, the fact of Jesus’ headship as a living reality must not be doubted. To speak of a divine call is to acknowledge the present rule of Christ in the church. What we are doing here today in consulting about the position of a minister of Christian education will recognize the Lord’s headship and fully acknowledge the divinity of calls we extend to public service in the church, whatever the form of a particular position may be.

2. The needs of the church will determine the forms which the public ministry in its midst will take. The church is free to alter them, add to them, or discontinue a particular form of the ministry. We do well to ask: are there unmet needs in the congregation’s educational efforts and programs that can be supplied by a minister of Christian education? In answering that question it is important to remember the broad meaning of the term “Christian education.” Furthermore, the specific form of the office of minister of education need not conform to one we can recognize in Scripture. “Teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you” has broad and varied application. I would expect that the experience of those among us who have already made use of a minister of Christian education in their midst can be of greater help than looking into Scripture for an example of this office.

3. Those whom the church calls into a specific ministry should have the qualifications for their office. The general qualifications given in Scripture for bishops, presbyters, or deacons apply to every form of the ministry. That the minister of Christian education needs to be apt to teach hardly needs to be mentioned. However, the particular teaching role a person is to have may determine more specifically what “apt to teach” means in his case and what preparation is needed.

4. We cannot take for granted that our present worker training program gives the specific training required for a minister of Christian education. It may or it may not. At any rate, the question is in place that we ask what additional training may be needed or useful. This the church is at liberty to answer according to its best judgment.

5. It was the fact that there were unassigned candidates that raised questions which led to this meeting. Since the harvest is plenteous and the laborers are few, the church will and must be concerned to put to work the laborers the Lord makes available. This does not mean that a candidate can claim it as a right to receive a call, but that the church is impoverished when it does not use the available workers. It remains the responsibility of the church to place workers where they with their gifts and training can profitably serve.

6. In considering the position of a minister or director of Christian education, the central concern will have to be to determine how our congregations may most effectively use the gifts of God to feed his lambs, to feed the sheep, to preach the gospel to every creature. How can we improve the congregation's educational program? That means that we raise questions about improving the educational programs we already have, especially our Sunday schools, vacation Bible schools, youth programs, Bible classes, etc. It means that we can ask about other possible programs that would either improve what we already are doing or fill in gaps that our self-examination may reveal. Could the minister of education help a congregation also in providing training for evangelism work? Many questions come to mind that we can and must ask. Let the questions we ask be evidence of our concern for the gospel and the souls it is to prepare for a blessed eternity.

A few thoughts by way of conclusion. By and large our congregations have recognized the church's broad responsibilities in the field of Christian education. The pastor's call generally makes him responsible for the various educational programs of the congregation. He is directly involved in preparing children and adults for confirmation and communion. Many of our congregations have Christian day schools with a staff of called, qualified teachers. They serve the children of the congregation through the eighth grade. To an increasing degree the importance of Christian education beyond the grade-school level is recognized by our congregations in establishing Lutheran high schools and Wisconsin Lutheran College. What our congregations are doing in all these programs is excellent. Our Synod owes encouragement to this by its considerable effort in training workers. The blessing of it all for our church and for our people is beyond question. There is always the danger, however, that a good program which fills important needs prevents us from recognizing further needs that remain unmet. This meeting, occasioned by what appears to be a surplus of workers, is leading us to ask: what unmet educational needs are there in our congregations? Are there other forms of the full-time public ministry, e.g., that of a minister of Christian education, that can contribute significantly toward improved Christian education in areas in which we still are weak? Perhaps the Lord is reminding us that he is ready to give gifts to his church through which he would bless us in ways we have not previously recognized. May God make us receptive to his manifold gifts, and bless this meeting to that end.